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The Peter Bell Memorial Lecture 2015

Religion and Society – A Sikh Perspective

by the
Lord Singh of Wimbledon CBE



Delivered in the East Room, Leeds Civic Hall,
by courtesy of Leeds City Council
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Chaired by Dr Simon Phillips (Chair of Concord)

Welcome by the Revd Canon Charles Dobbin MBE (Chair of Leeds Faiths Forum)

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FRIENDS, it is a real pleasure to join you this evening to give the Peter Bell Memorial lecture. I had the good fortune to have met Peter a few times and I really appreciate all the work he did in promoting good inter faith relations, and it is a particular honour to be asked to give this memorial lecture.

In speaking about the relevance of religion in society, I would like to place particular emphasis on how we can help our children become responsible citizens in a fast changing world. In the Sikh view, education is all about preparing our children to make a positive contribution to the well-being of the world around. While we rightly teach our children the 3 Rs to be literate and numerate, we seem to place less emphasis on the other equally important 3 Rs which are the essence of religious teaching, namely right, wrong and responsibility.

Many believe that this responsibility lies with parents; others assume it lies with the school. In the Sikh view it's the responsibility of both parents and teachers to help children to grow up to be considerate and responsible members of society. Unfortunately, it sometimes slips between the two and children are left to develop their own sense of right and wrong, guided by irresponsible advertising and Internet chatlines.

The following lines of an English hymn are highly appropriate in looking at the changing world before us:

New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast with truth.

Until very recent times, we could all grow up in the comfort and security of a religion and culture that we shared with those that lived around us. It was common and patriotic (it still is for some), to go into raptures about *our* way of life compared with the inferior ways of foreigners. Many believed that even God acknowledged our natural superiority, and was always on our side. And schools, in the teaching of literature and history often contributed to the promotion of false ideas of superiority and difference.

Remember the famous words of John of Gaunt in Shakespeare's Richard II, which we learnt at school:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war.
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or a moat defensive to a house
Against the envy of less happier lands

And more!

We learnt to criticise the literary style, the use of figurative language. We never thought to criticise the xenophobic insularity of its general sentiment. Nor did the possibility occur to us that other nations might have different explanations of God's purpose in isolating the British.

Seriously though, it's important to understand that this sort of thinking was common to most nations and cultures. Many in India even argued that even to leave the shores of the subcontinent would pollute them for ever.

In the past, we could strengthen our sense of cohesion and identity, including religious identity, by misrepresenting the ways and beliefs of others, or describing them in disparaging terms. For example, the dictionary definition of heathen is 'those who are not Christian, Jew or Muslim'. So you can see where that leaves me!

We all grow up with such in-built prejudices and are reluctant to see the good in others. I referred to this in my very first Radio 4 'Thought for the Day' broadcast. At the time, I was working with a large civil engineering contractor in their London office, on the 7th floor of an eight storey building. My talk was about my end of day experience. We were home civil engineers and above us were the international civil engineers. They saw themselves as superior people with stickers of Seychelles, Hong Kong or other exotic places on their brief cases.

At the end of the day we would head to the lift and as the lift door opened, those inside, the superior people from the 8th floor, would stick their stomachs out a little to give the impression that the lift was fuller than it was. Undeterred, we'd barge in, and the 8th floor stomachs would grudgingly recede. We were now all civil engineers, working for the same

company.

When the lift reached the floors below inhabited by the lowest of the low, the Department of Health and Social Security, we would mutter ‘cripples, why can't they walk down a few flights of stairs’? As the lift door opened, we would stick out our stomachs to deter this lower form of life entering *our* lift.

Undeterred, these civil servants and bureaucrats, who did nothing but drink tea all day long, would get into our lift. Grudgingly, we pull back our stomachs and we all went down to the ground floor, where we got out, all differences forgotten, until the next day. (You can see where prejudice can take us—it wasn't tea: it was coffee!)

We see the same sort of behaviour when we get on a train, or a bus. Those inside become ‘us’. Recent immigrants are often loudest in opposing new immigration. There is a law of life, which I'll call Indarjit's law: that when two or more people find sufficient in common to call themselves ‘us’, they will find a ‘them’, to look down on, to strengthen their sense of unity. When a person leaves a group of people who have been chatting together, the odds are that those remaining will strengthen their changed unity by talking negatively about the person who just left.

You see this search for unity at the expense of others in a milder form with conflict between football supporters, but, all too easily, it can lead to active hatred of whole communities. I saw a reminder of this descent to evil on a visit to Auschwitz in Poland, where many Jews blamed for all the ills in Europe were murdered. While going round the former concentration camp, I saw the shower area where new arrivals were asked to wash before receiving promised new clothes and food. Once in, the doors would be closed and deadly gas fed in through vents in the ceiling. I saw the gas canisters, the conveyer to the incinerator and mounds of human hair; but what really got to me was a huge pile of infants' shoes. In my mind's eye, I could see little children skipping and laughing, blissfully unaware of what was to befall them.

Friends, I grew up thinking that the holocaust was a one off case of brutality and depravity. Sadly it is not. We have seen it repeated in the killing fields of Cambodia, Ruanda and elsewhere. Sikhs experienced it in the Partition and in the government sponsored genocide of 1984.

I once did some work for Amnesty International, looking at genocide and

human rights abuse in a number of different countries; abuse which often involved unbelievable depravity. Almost as bad as the abuse is the realisation that those who we learn to trust are often the perpetrators: police and soldiers, and, even worse, priests and teachers and previously friendly neighbours. Why do people behave in such ways?

Goulding in his book *Lord of the Flies*, about a group of children marooned on a remote island, puts forward a thesis that without moral and ethical guidance, children, and by implication, adults, gravitate to less civilised behaviour. It is a disturbing view that unfortunately, has the ring of truth.

The reality of human nature—and the evidence is all around us—is that we humans do not come with preloaded software of right, wrong and responsibility. Decent responsible behaviour has to be taught and learnt. We cannot have a better society without better people. We cannot have better people without responsible teaching. The question is, who should do the teaching?

Some say that if we teach citizenship and democracy in schools, all will be well. But is this really enough? Here, it is important to differentiate between two levels of behaviour. The first is behaviour that keeps us out of trouble. For the small child it's not throwing food about, or not kicking aunts and uncles in the shins. For adults it's being reasonably polite to those around us, and complying with those in authority and the rules and laws of society.

Is religion necessary for teaching behaviour at this level? Of course not, any more than it's necessary to involve religion in teaching a dog to stand on its hind legs, or a dolphin to perform tricks. Sanction or reward are sufficient motivators. In many ways, the teaching of citizenship to help children understand and appreciate the society in which they live, falls into this category. It's important for children to learn about national institutions, democracy, the media, ethnic identity and the consequences of bullying and racism. These teachings of citizenship, or conforming behaviour, are not however the same as the teachings of religion.

Conforming behaviour, or the social norms of society, are constantly changing. For example, unlike the law in this country, the law of the land in France prohibits the wearing of the hijab for Muslim girls and the turban for Sikh boys in state schools. Citizenship education in French schools would support such a policy. The reality, however, is that the prohibition is bound to harm integration and hurt self-esteem by forcing

children to have one identity at school and another at home. State policy in France is at odds with both common sense and the ethical imperative for its citizens to understand and respect different ways of life. It is a policy that has rightly been condemned by the Catholic Church, and others.

Some of you will recall that in this country in the 60's, accommodation ads in shop windows often had the words 'no blacks, coloureds or Irishmen', perfectly legally. Citizenship teaching at the time would not have criticised such behaviour.

Religious teachings in their true essence, unlike citizenship, define fundamental truths that, unlike the law of the land, do not change with time and place. I'll give examples from Sikh teachings and there are resonant echoes of these in sister faiths. For example, in his very first sermon, Guru Nanak declared 'Na koi Hindu, Na koi Mussalman'—that in God's eyes there is neither Hindu nor Muslim, and by today's extension, neither Christian, Sikh nor Jew. God, he taught, is not interested in our religious labels, but in the way we behave. I'll give other examples to show how religion aims to move us towards not only being better citizens, but also towards a better and fairer society

Citizenship skills help an individual's material progress and standing in society. The teachings of our great religious leaders, on the other hand, frequently challenge social norms. Religious teachings have nothing to do with conformity, or, equally importantly, individual or material advancement. They are about improvement of society as a whole. Religion takes us away from today's obsession with self, to active concern for others.

Guru Nanak taught that where self exists there is no God, where God exists there is no self. Or as a Christian theologian put it, it's the 'i' in the middle of 'sin', that makes it sin. Religion then, is fundamentally different from the teaching of citizenship in that far from conforming, it has its own standards and frequently challenges existing social norms in looking to deeper truths. On a personal note, it wasn't citizenship or conformity to society norms that led to me challenging apartheid in South Africa long before it became fashionable.

Let's now look then at how can we make ours a more cohesive and caring society. Voluntary effort and increasingly government and other statutory effort are becoming more alert to social ills in our society. But in focussing

on problems, rather than more holistically on causes, secular society often tends to look through the wrong end of the telescope, and seeks to treat spots and sores of social maladies, rather than look further to underlying causes.

Let me give some examples. If problems resulting from drug abuse take up too much police time, the call is legalise their use and free police time, rather than question why the use of drugs has risen so dramatically. The huge rise in child and teenage pregnancies is met with a call to issue ever more explicit sex education in schools rather than teach the importance of respect, consideration and courtesy. It is no surprise that Britain has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe. Increasing alcohol abuse? Let's extend or abolish licensing hours to spread the incidence of drunken or loutish behaviour. Result: a rise in binge drinking. Too many people ending up in prison? Let's build more prisons. Extend this thinking, of looking to the wrong end of a problem, to the behaviour of little junior who greets visitors to the house by kicking them in the shins. Secular solution: issue said visitors with shin pads as they enter the front door!

In working for a better society, we are reminded by our religious teachings to look again at balance and priorities. Today in our preoccupation with personal advancement we all too easily forget wider needs and obligations, and as a result, have previously unheard of prosperity side by side with poverty in the marginalised, escalating crime, rising alcoholism, drug dependency, loneliness, the homeless, broken homes and other disturbing evidence of social disintegration.

Sikhs believe that our different religions should take the lead in addressing the underlying causes of our social ills, starting with our neglect of the role of the family. Religion sees marriage, fidelity and the family as central to the health and wellbeing of society. It is easy to allow understanding, compassion and support for those in different situations to blind us to the importance of an ideal. TV comedy in which infidelity is seen as something of a giggle, blinds us to the hurt that transient, adult relationships, can cause to children. A short true story makes the point better than any words of mine.

Two small boys were fighting, hammer and tongs in the school playground. With great difficulty, a teacher finally managed to prise the two apart demanding to know what it was all about. Looking at the teacher, eyes swollen with tears, one of the children said it was because

the other's dad had taken his mum away.

While we should not condemn those who choose different lifestyles, there is a need for clearer highlighting of responsibility and the benefits of stable family relations. Both those in political life and leaders of faith communities have much to do here. Today, more than half of local authority expenditure is spent in remedying family neglect of children and the elderly.

The teachings of religion constantly remind us to look to the wider implications of all we do. Guru Nanak was boldly critical of divisive practices such as the caste system or superstitious dietary customs and taboos on eating with, or socialising with, those of other faiths. He and his successor Gurus taught the oneness of our human family and in this emphasised the dignity and complete equality of women—teachings wholly at odds with the practices of the day.

I believe the founders of our different faiths intended their teachings to remind us of ethical imperatives for peace, harmony and social justice that should underpin all secular decision making. This should be the collective mission of our different religions. Years ago, working as a management consultant with a well-meaning but profligate local authority, I managed to insert a mandatory paragraph in reports on all new initiatives prompting consideration of the financial implications of the proposal. Today, every new bit of legislation or social or political initiative should be followed by a paragraph on ‘implications for wider society’

In moving to a fairer and more peaceful society it is important to remember that life has both spiritual and material dimensions, and if we neglect either of these, it will be to our ultimate regret. This fundamental truth has long been recognised by our religious founders. Jesus Christ taught that man cannot live by bread alone. He recognised the need to look to the material side of life, but taught the folly of looking to material comforts alone to bring meaning and contentment to life.

Sikhism gives the story of the miser Dunning Chand, who spent all his time amassing wealth until he was given a needle by Guru Nanak to take with him to the next world. He then realised the folly of greed and meanness.

On another occasion, the Guru gently chided some so-called holy men who had left their families to go in the wilderness in search of God. The Guru told them that God was not to be found in the wilderness but in

their homes in looking to the needs of their families and others around them.

Today there's not much wilderness left, but it is all too easy to spend our life in a virtual wilderness, surfing the internet for hours on end, or in front of television, or, in other pursuits that leave us little time for those around us.

Religious teachings can help us move to a better and fairer society. But to be really effective our faiths must face up to an urgent challenge, perhaps the most important challenge of our time, namely the now urgent need to carry out a drastic spring-cleaning of what today often passes for religion. We need to discard unhelpful rituals, superstitions and dated customs and practices that have nothing to do with teachings Practices that have over years, cancer-like, attached themselves to religion, and simply serve to



mask or distort underlying ethical teachings. Practices and customs that have no relevance to life today. Not easy. Religious texts sometimes contain xenophobic attitudes to others, possibly understandable in the

context of persecution initially suffered at the hands of other communities, but in no way either right or relevant to the world of today. The problem is that some believe that every word in their scriptures is the word of God, and we have to go on hating or looking down on others.

Sikhism sees other religions as different paths to a truer understanding of God; like paths up a mountain. We can start from different points, but still reach the same goal. Nor are the paths mutually exclusive. They frequently merge in ways that give us a heightened understanding of our own faith. Take, for example, the Sikh teaching ‘There is an inner-light in all; and that light is God.’ Exactly the same sentiment is conveyed in the lines of the Christian hymn:

‘To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all.’

It is important to remember that a major benefit of our study of other religions is that it gives us a wider view of religion and a new and fuller perspective on our own beliefs. We learn that different religions are not barriers between people, but gateways to a greater understanding and enrichment of life.

Today, we have to knock down the false barriers of belief and exclusivity between religions. When, in the course of redevelopment, a building is demolished in a familiar area, we see the surrounding landscape in a quite different light. In the same way, when false barriers of bigotry are demolished through dialogue and understanding, we will see our different religions as they really are: overlapping circles of belief, in which the area of overlap is much greater than the smaller area of difference. In that area of overlap, we find common values of tolerance, compassion and concern for social justice: values that can take us from the troubled times of today, to a fairer and more peaceful society.

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