

THE FAITHS AND THE FUTURE - A PERSONAL VIEW

"THE COMRADESHIP OF OUR JOINT BELIEF"

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"A clearer understanding of the Holy Spirit could help Christians grapple with the question of the other great faiths in the world,, the major theological issue for the rest of the century," (1)

John Taylor, former Bishop of Winchester, is one among many Christian leaders exploring this area; as also are the leaders of other faiths as well. Beneath the turbulent ideological tides of the Twentieth Century a deeper current can be discerned, a steady growth of love and understanding between those who according to their lights serve God and humanity; the emergence of a global conscience; the beginnings of common action on urgent and long-term needs. This process, I believe, is not of human contriving, and is one of the major trends shaping the future.

If I venture to set down some personal reflections it is because my life has been lived on frontiers of faith, ever since my father Canon Stacy Waddy took his Australian family to live in Jerusalem in the year 1919, in the immediate aftermath of World War I. As Chaplain with the ANZAC's and then at St George's Cathedral, he and others walked uncharted ways, before the word "ecumenical" had become current. Where others saw "religion" as a source of division, he spoke of "the comradeship of our joint belief." He urged "the energetic diffusion of the spirit that is the opposite of antagonism." It was a conviction untinged by indifferentism, "Far the greatest unity of all we share, but the most often forgotten - we are all believers in One God,, Not one of us would have any use for the flabby idea that our differences do not matter. But we are surely foolish if we are so afraid of seeming untrue to our own religion that we never dare appeal to the comradeship of our joint belief." Many years later, at the time of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, "The Times" re-voiced his conviction, (2)

There have been outstanding events in the progress of understanding: Vatican 2, Papal visits to Turkey, India, North Africa; the gathering at Assisi. There has also been a growing articulation of the basis for such understanding. Here are some examples.

Cardinal Hume speaks of "those of other faiths who represent the religious instinct of today's world" and recalls Abraham's vision of God which links the monotheistic faiths. (3)

Archbishop Runcie, returning from India in 1986, spoke of "the work of the Spirit at the centre of all faiths." Christians, he said, must learn to recognise this, with courage and humility. It takes courage, he says, to see diversity as a rich resource. (4)

Bishop Kenneth Cragg points out the internal emphasis of much Christian thought. In the earlier centuries theological debates were mainly concerned with the nature of Christ; at the Reformation with the Atonement. These questions were within the circle of Christian belief; the fact of other faiths, and the questions this raises, have not yet been fully addressed. (5)

Bishop David Brown, in his masterly study of the faiths, "All Their Splendour", points towards an "inclusive", rather than an "exclusive" emphasis in theology. "We must move from an emphasis upon the uniqueness of particular events and persons which excludes from consideration other manifestations of God's gracious presence, to an appreciation of those same events as having universal significance for the whole life of mankind." (6) And in the puzzling realm of the unique and the universal, Bishop Taylor points out that in the vocabulary of the Spirit the words have the same meaning. To our limited minds the two are distinct; in the perspective of the Spirit the conflict is resolved. (7)

Professor Keith Ward finds convergences at the deepest level between the perceptions of men of different faiths: "common ground" not as marginal territory that does not matter much, but at the heart of belief and practice. (8) Donald Nicholl takes this conviction to an Ecumenical centre near Jerusalem, and sees its "Testing of Hearts" at work in the anguished relationships of that troubled city. (9)

The Oxford Book of Prayer, edited by Bishop George Appleton, draws on the world-wide range of deep spirituality. (10)

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It is people who meet, not systems. It is by meeting live people, and listening to them, that dangerous stereotypes are broken. Innumerable such encounters world-wide have gone in to the creation of new attitudes. Those I mention here have touched my own life.

Great men of faith from Asia have had their impact on our age; notably Mahatma Gandhi who showed a way other than violence to change the world. His grandchildren and great-grand children carry forward his tradition. Tagore's grand vision of beauty combined with rural and educational reform gave another inspiration. C.F. Andrews - Englishman and priest, at a time when both roles were unpopular - gave something of value to both these leaders of India. From the Buddhist world, the Dalai Lama through his years of exile has brought the West a challenge. I heard him say, "Learn from your enemies. It is from my enemies, not from my friends, that I learn to love, and that my capacity to love is tested." We all knew that he did indeed have enemies; and that this teaching was in the Gospels. The Dalai Llama challenged me deeply to apply it.

Of all inter-faith encounters, those between adherents of the Abrahamic faiths find a special importance at the present time. The Lambeth Conference issued a report on "Inter-Faith Dialogue; Jewish/Christian/Muslim" which begins; "Whilst dialogue with all faiths is highly desirable we recognize a special relationship between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. All three of these religions see themselves in a common relationship to Abraham, the father of the faithful, the friend of God. Moreover these faiths, which at times have been fiercely antagonistic to one another, have a particular responsibility for bringing about a fresh, constructive relationship which can contribute to the well-being of the human family, and the peace of the world, particularly in the Middle East." There are outstretched hands from Muslims and Jews as well as Christians, as some significant encounters show.

Andre Chouraqui, scholar and for years Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, is one bridge-builder between the monotheistic faiths. He was born in Algeria of an old Jewish family, was French educated, and a fighter in the French resistance. Back in Algeria, he fell ill, and at that time he found again the Jewish faith he had lost - helped by

Christian nurses and Muslim Sufis. He and his wife moved to Israel, and the work he has chosen to pursue is a new translation of the Bible into French - the New Testament as well as the Hebrew Scriptures. He is following this by a translation of the Qur'an.

To turn to the Muslim world, in 1965 Cardinal Koenig of Vienna received an historic invitation to lecture in the ancient University of Al-Azhar, in Cairo. The subject chosen was monotheism - the link that binds together Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The coming together of two such venerable and influential traditions, through the opening of the doors of this Islamic stronghold, made a key encounter. I was privileged to be present. The spirit in which the invitation was issued was illustrated for me personally by the welcome I received from the then Rector of Al-Azhar, Shaikh Baqouri, who had been responsible for reforms designed to make the university more relevant to the needs of the times. A friend and I were invited to his home. He gently chided me for omitting to say grace before eating; and as we left he said, "I like meeting Christians who live their Christianity."

Among those listening to Cardinal Koenig were the members of a society, "Brotherhood of Faiths", started by Muslims and Copts in 1961. Its meetings, held in each other's homes, continue. The founders included two pioneers of modern medicine in Egypt, Dr Abdo Sallam and his wife, Dr Sallam, for some years Minister of Health, devoted his life to improving health services in Egypt. In 1981, the journal "Islamochristiana" reported an occasion in Rome when he spoke on his vision for Islam's welcome to Christian communities, (11)

Among recent Muslim initiatives "to promote a wider awareness of the tolerant face of the great monotheistic faiths" is the Calamus Foundation in London.

Dr Fathi Osman, Egyptian scholar, in his years as editor of the monthly "Arabia", wrote constantly of the necessity of increased cooperation. Reflecting on the theme, "Jesus, the first universal prophet," he looks with hope for the effectiveness of Christianity in face of today's dangers, and to the partnership of men of faith in dealing with them, (12)

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relationships between Christians, Jews and Muslims are of paramount importance. In 1989, as one set of walls fell, another seemed to rise, as though the "demonising" tendency in human hearts must find an enemy. There are signs of a fresh wave of anti-semitism, and of rising fear in regard to Islam, both unworthy of the Christian Gospel. To counter these is urgent, and to welcome the asset of the presence of both our sister faiths.

The Muslim factor in the new Europe is of importance. Each western European nation has its Muslim communities, large or small; some 2 million in Britain. Concern for the many urgent issues in the Mediterranean region is shared with Muslims. Eastern European lands are historic frontiers between Islam and Christianity. Further East, one in five of the citizens of the USSR are of Muslim origin. Alongside renewed nationalism, a renewal of faith can be discerned - parallel to that among Russian Christians. For example, in 1989 Archbishop Kyrill of Smolensk spoke of the key role of conscience, of absolute moral standards and God-centred ethics. And in Kirkhizia, far to the East the leading Kazi spoke in almost the same terms; of honour and dignity and conscience, of "the God who lives in every man and offers a universal code,"(13)

How can the ordinary Christian make fruitful the friendships that come his way? Bishop George Appleton gave me this word, "We need to think more about God as our Creator. He made everyone on this earth, and He loves them all." This calls for recognition and respect for the work of God in every person we meet.

Bishop Cragg gives three points. First, as we have seen, encounters are between people, rather than systems. Second; Maximise the points of agreement. Identify them, and make the most of them. Third; Do not be afraid of differences. They are there. Acknowledge them, and find ways of working together.

Four words help me. Hospitality, Humility, Gratitude, Cooperation.

HOSPITALITY

It is in the hospitality of homes that I have learned most. In the setting of the courtesy and consideration due from guest and host - and I have had countless opportunities to be both - love and understanding have a chance to take root and grow. There may be debate - but this is not usually uppermost in people's minds. The interchange is in a different climate from the many explorations of "dialogue".

One such experience was in Beirut. A distinguished family, exiles from Iraq, descendants of the Prophet, invited a group from India to their beautiful villa by the sea. Travelling with the group was an Englishwoman, niece of Gertude Bell, famous for her work in Iraq after World War I. Just how controversial that work had been I had no idea until our hostess welcomed us.

When Iraq came under British mandate, search took place for a suitable ruler. The most prominent Iraqi candidate was the father of our hostess. But events in Damascus had left Prince Faisal, ally of the British during World War I, without a throne. In 1921 it was decided to install him in Baghdad - an unpopular decision which made it desirable to have the local leader out of the way. Gertude Bell invited him to tea. Her colleague Percy Cox arranged his arrest as he left. They did their best to explain that he had not been seized while a guest in her house. But the fury aroused was not just political; the sacred laws of hospitality had been breached in a most insulting way. It was after his return from exile that our hostess was born. She grew up with a hatred of the British; she learned English but determined never to use it. This was the story she told me - in fluent English - as she welcomed us into her home. It seemed that the two women had met a few months before. The Englishwoman was shaken by what had happened, and apologised for the arrogance and high-handedness with which her family - with good reason - were associated. Their daughters made good friends.

Later, I was invited to stay in that home, and I spent some weeks with the family, including Ramadan. Many of the basic insights that went into the book, "The Muslim Mind", were given me at that time.

Arab hospitality is rightly famous. But every group can be proud of its own tradition. Christian hospitality is a duty and a joy. It is important to realise that no one has a monopoly of its practice,

just as no one can claim a monopoly of faith, or hope, or charity. Its grace is common in some measure to all human societies.

In 1989, in Islamabad, I saw its magic at work in a Pakistani artist's home. A group of women from Calcutta had come to Pakistan as guests. They were astonished and overwhelmed by the welcome they received, greater than anything they had hoped - or feared, in what had sometimes seemed hostile territory. I said, "You will be able to ask them back," "We could never do so well," was the reply; surprising to me, who have received most generous hospitality in both countries.

GRATITUDE.

To say thank-you is an essential part of every relationship. It runs like a thread through the New Testament. The Psalms are full of it. It is equally important in the Qur'an, where the opposite term to "unbelief" (kufr) is "gratitude" (shukr). The venerable Indian scholar, Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, lecturing in Oxford in August 1989, spoke of it as "one of the bases of culture and civilisation." It is "the acknowledgment of a truth, appreciation of the great achievements of others and returning thanks to those who have done any favour to us." The day this noble sentiment is expelled from our lives, he continued, all our efforts will become meaningless. All rightly ordered relationships - even between parents and children - will lose their significance. (14)

HUMILITY

There is something of humility in saying thank-you. It is difficult to be arrogant and grateful at the same time. To seek out the places where we can acknowledge a debt of gratitude may be the lost key to opening apparently closed doors.

It is a grace much neglected. I have never felt a greater need for it than I did in Calcutta. I was staying in the home of a Hindu lecturer, widow of a famous Muslim philosopher and friend of Tagore. Some of the neighbours slept on the pavements; others represented the flowering of thought and poetry and social effort that flourish in that vigorous city. A Christian student was asked to take me to the Anglican Cathedral on Advent Sunday. Jesus, said the collect for the day, "came to visit us in great humility." Could I, with all my

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British background of education and privilege - and Empire - honestly say that as a visitor I came with great humility? The same thought is echoed on Palm Sunday, when we pray not only for ourselves, but "that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility."

CO-OPERATION

Whatever the theoretical difficulties of understanding between people who hold different beliefs, there are countless examples daily where such people are at work together; in home and school, in factory and commerce, research laboratory; at every level of international endeavour. No section of the human race alone can tackle the breath-taking tasks that face us in the next century - or counter the dangers that threaten mankind with self-destruction. We cannot wait for a satisfying answer to the questions our minds raise, before we get on with the work of the day; and in daily obedience and love we may be given deeper understanding.

To respect what others believe, while loyally practising one's own faith, is not a process of either "indifferentism" (All religions are the same) or "syncretism" (Take the best bits of each, in a sort of spiritual esperanto). It involves the courage to go through the doors that open, and appreciate the life we find outside the walls of our own tradition. Many have found a deeper understanding and commitment to their own faith through this process. I am one of them. Another example was a diplomat and his wife, working in Pakistan. "We were on the cocktail round, with little thought of religion," she told me. "It was our Muslim cook, praying in the kitchen and keeping Ramadan, who turned us back to our church." This is not exactly the same as a study of comparative religions. Differences there certainly are between Ramadan and Lent... but the discipline of the one can be a healthy challenge to observe the other.

Among all the many current explorations of the relations between men and women of differing traditions of faith, the most penetrating and challenging are those which find convergences at the deepest level; common ground, not as marginal territory where agreement is easy, but at the heart of belief and practice.

This, I believe, is only just beginning. The immediate urge towards it is found in the moment of acute danger at which we stand. The 1990's are only one episode in a centuries-long interaction - 2000 years between Christianity and Judaism, 1400 years between them and Islam. But it is the moment in history with which we have to deal; at which our relationships, our choices, our actions will hasten or delay God's purposes for His servants and His world.

The overpowering sense that overwhelms us is that of need, of helplessness in the face of man's greed, arrogance, indifference, cruelty; of the apparent impotence of the urges to reconciliation, to solutions.

"Out of the depths I call to thee, O thou Eternal." In those depths there is convergence. Such a sense of need, of humbling ourselves before a wisdom and power far beyond our own, is deeply implanted in our nature and is at the root of every growth of faith.

The Hebrew Psalms, source of this cry for help, chart the path from weakness and sin to acceptance of the mercy and strength of God. Written centuries before the life and death of Christ, they voice the experience of repentance and transformation. Recently I received a beautifully bound book from Qum, in Iran, a place today with associations more political than spiritual in western minds, but essentially the centre of a long spiritual tradition. The book is called "The Psalms of Islam", and is a new translation of prayers associated with the great-grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, a man of deep spirituality. These devotions indeed run parallel to the Hebrew Psalms, especially in their worship in times of adversity.

The "Whispered Prayer of the Repenters" recalls Psalm 51: "Make me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." "I ask thee, O Forgiver of great sins, O Mender of broken bones... Let the cloud of Thy mercy cast its shadow upon my sins, and send the billow of Thy clemency flowing over my faults." (15)

The healing of division, the will to solutions, the foundation of future cooperation in the service of mankind; these have everything to do with faith and are the proper concern of all believers. Initiatives in friendship, in cooperation, in common action on a basis of shared belief and purpose, are both urgent and relevant.

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