

IS RELIGION A MAJOR THREAT TO WORLD PEACE?

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INTRODUCTION

There is a number of ways in which this question can be understood.

First we can hear it as *a negative criticism* of whatever we seek to do as members of the church of God in our own parish, our own congregation, diocese or district. I say this because in doing all of the things which I have outlined we are involved in religion itself. The argument goes something like this: we claim to have a 'direct line' to God – and still the majority of problems in the world can trace their origin to religion itself. The numerical strength of contemporary Christianity is, we are repeatedly told, in Africa, and more generally, in the Global South. We are also told that they have a pure faith, an unswerving trust in God and live lives guided by Biblical principles. However, I will never forget, for example, reading in The Church Times that apparently a leading layman in a cathedral in Africa, the diocesan bishop of which is in the front line in the human sexuality issue in the Anglican Communion, leaves Morning Prayer, goes round the corner and takes on a new role as High Priest in a form of native religion. One of the alarming issues which has come to the surface in contemporary Africa is the way in which Pentecostalism and native religion have seemingly joined forces. In 2007 I spent ten days on an Inter Faith Consultation in a significant African country, Nigeria, and at no point in the planning or the delivery could we get the African participants to talk about indigenous religion or African spirituality. The situation is very fluid, very complex and we in the Northern Hemisphere need to be careful in extrapolating from the situation what we, for our own reasons, want to find.

Secondly we can come face to face with *the threat of Islamicism* in western and eastern society. As I sit down to write the first draft of this paper (20.ix.2008) I hear of the blowing up by a suicide bomber of the Hotel Marriott in Islamabad, in which incidentally I spent a night in 2005.

Traditionally this is one of the very few safe places in which westerners who are not diplomats – airline staff for example and aid agency workers – can safely stay. There is a fascinating and frightening argument to unravel in relation to this area to which we will come back. At this point I want again only to point to the sense of guilt induced by the understanding of an Islamic takeover in the west because of the decadence, spinelessness of western Christianity. Somehow this is something into which we have been sucked – probably in most cases for reasons unknown to ourselves.

Thirdly Christianity has suffered from *post-colonialism*. One of the most articulate exponents of this from an Anglican perspective is Henry Orombi, Primate of Uganda, incidentally a graduate of ISE and another is Peter Akinola, Primate of Nigeria, whose theological formation took place in the rather Liberal Virginia Theological Seminary in what we now call TEC. The argument is ambiguous. Part of it asserts that the contemporary African church has a freedom to think for itself now that Africa has its independence from former colonial powers; another part of it asserts that the Africans of today are more true to what the western missionaries came to bring them in terms of the Gospel than are today's western churches. These positions on the surface seem to be contradictory. Each scenario deserves to be unpacked because, in my opinion, each and all give us a fascinating insight into the subject of religion *per se*.

There is a widespread conviction that western Christianity has run its course. The expression of this conviction goes as follows: flirtation with Liberalism has meant that the ecclesiastical elite have no moral standards; do not live according to the Bible; have led Christianity into a dead end where it faces the double-headed monster of aggressive secularism and militant Islam, both of which it is powerless to resist. But I offer you an

example from a totally different culture where you might argue exactly the same – and then you would also have to ask yourself a different set of questions about inculturation. In Northern India the ‘success’ of Christian mission is such that more and more people no longer see the need exclusively to be Christian over against being Hindu. It is a tremendously interesting and creative situation – frightening to many - in that Christianity has so comprehensively inculturated the presentation of its message that people are happy with two religious identities side by side and at the same time: Is this the success or the failure of mission? It is a far cry from Ireland where people of differing denominations within Christianity still find it difficult to accept the validity and integrity of those of ‘the other side’ in terms of denominational identity and conviction.

If we go back, in a sense, to the beginning, we get a varied picture about the extent to which Christianity was culturally or counter-culturally Jewish. Of course the theological idea of a monotheism having a Son was anathema to the Jews. However the idea of Messiah was not. The death of God, again, was anathema and the paradox of grace at the heart of Christianity as a system of salvation is and remains theologically incomprehensible to the Jews. I had the rare privilege of listening to The Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, while attending the recent Lambeth Conference of bishops. I suppose I had always wondered about those passages in Isaiah about the Gentiles and particularly when I sang *Nunc Dimittis* at Evensong. My wondering was about the intentionality of Judaism to include Gentiles in the covenant of God along with the whole of creation. An interesting and indeed remarkable thing which the Chief Rabbi said referred to the success of Christianity in becoming an international global religion and the abject failure of Judaism to do so. He went so far as to say: ‘You carry the light for us.’ It was an amazing moment when you consider the hand which history had dealt to the Jewish people, first with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and then with the ravages of the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s AD.

Another of the arguments which we often hear now is that: Christendom is dead. What was

Christendom in the first place? Substantially and essentially, it was the declaration under Constantine the Great that Christianity would henceforth be the state religion of the then Roman Empire. Until this day, such a decision - political and religious all at once - has had profound effect on the relationship between religion and nationalism. Both Nazism and Fascism in the twentieth century did a deal with Christianity; the Tzars in Russia had already done a deal with the Orthodox Church which promptly did some sort of a deal with Communism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Bishop Bell of Chichester witness to the hypocrisy of the deal done with the National Church in Germany which saw its survival in a distorted *status quo*. Somehow, since the fourth century, there is a conviction - however perverted it becomes in any of its living manifestations – that religion is at the heart of the identity of a nation and needs to ‘hang in there’ no matter how that national self-identity changes, develops or declines. This leaves us in tremendous difficulties and with tremendous problems in the world of history as it revolves around us, not least in our increasingly complex Northern Ireland. And yet it raises proper questions about a religion which is intentionally incarnational.

The power of patronage is something which lies deep in the response of any religion to the reality of life around it. In differing ways, Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism in Ireland have enjoyed patronage in Irish society as had Presbyterianism in Scotland. What tends to happen is that denominations accrue to themselves an entitlement to dominate by virtue of assimilation to the political governmental system of the day. The country in Europe which has most comprehensively shed this umbrella of religiosity is France where, only in the last year or so, Nicholas Sarkozy – a Jewish person educated in a Roman Catholic school – is now seeking to put religion back on the map of a nation which has had enforced *laicete* for almost a century. (I suspect that he has his eye to both social cohesion and electoral advantage in that he hopes to accommodate within French society the Muslim population by giving opportunity for the expression of the religious self far beyond the remit of Christianity. Both Mr Tony Blair and Prince Charles seem to think along similar lines.)

The Roman Empire of the fourth century gave to a Christianity which had had the courage to run with the radical option for the Gentiles pioneered by Peter and Paul and to establish quickly around the rim of the Mediterranean Sea self-confessedly Christian communities in the first century, a place at the table of government. It is part of the glory and the wonder of God that these communities, which often built on pre-existent Jewish communities, hung in there and were sufficiently in place by the time the Constantinian Revolution came about. This brought patronage on a very grand and globalized scale, along with a legal protection which built on the genuine toleration of 'foreign' religions which characterized the Roman Empire much more than did persecution. The Roman Empire set Christianity four-square in the context of Western Culture because *romanitas* was the only culture and cultural option of the day and it was the dominant culture.

If I may presume to indulge in generalizations - but I hope for a good purpose - a number of other things, as well as the Roman Empire and its successors, established the position of Christianity in Western Culture. This is not to say that there were not other already-existing highly sophisticated cultures. Christianity, like Islam, among world religions is mission-driven. In our case this derives from the theological *sent-ness* of God the Son by God the Father. In fact, during the summer past, the bishops of the Anglican Communion spent the best part of three weeks being equipped by the archbishop of Canterbury in two things: *God's mission and a bishop's discipleship*. Indeed that double emphasis is well worth exploring in its own right for what it says about the position of the contemporary bishop among the laity, the people of God - but that will wait for another day!

Expansion, empire and exploitation, The Printing Press, the European Enlightenment, the Age of Reason - all of these, about which people here know far more than do I, have contributed to the dominance and domination of Christianity in the West and far beyond. It would be simplest were I to confine my remarks to British expansion but Africa, the Near and Middle East alone witness to the presence and the retreat of Western, and

therefore particularly European, Christianities. Schemes of re-union in India North and South and in Pakistan have been the most innovative and courageous. They have accepted the centrality of episcopal ministry as a point of definition of the church ecumenically and of the church's ministries as deriving from that conviction. However, this either needs to be implemented with a rigorous conviction verging on near-ruthlessness or else it requires tremendous patience if it is to be talked through, accepted and enacted. The other major consideration is that Christianity in the West has always, constantly been changing. Many church people resist this very fact. To use the word: *evolving* is, in my opinion, a mistake because it implies a form of development which takes leave of anything which has gone before by moving into a new and quite different sphere of life. Change and development in ecclesiastical life and thinking tend to go in cycles and to have a relatively small range of possible permutations. Christianity at its heart grapples with its own inherited tradition of response to the person and the presence of God the Trinity. However painful such movements and developments are at any given time, however unlikely they are by anyone, they point irreversibly to the diversity of interpretation and application as lying at the heart of a religion. This is part of its instability and its future-focus. To my mind, this is the world-view, theologically understood or in practice partially understood, to which we belong and which we need to be willing to commend to others as a working definition of Christianity today.

Many people would say that things have become a lot more difficult for Christianity in the last twenty years or so. One of the factors in this is the upsurge of *postmodernism*. Its genius is not to be too readily defined but, whatever it is, it breeds an openness to anything which has no traceable tradition as having a validity in what I might refer to as 'the marketplace of ideas.' You are, therefore, as good as your sales-pitch and at every point you have to compete to be heard and to hold your footing. But your tradition can be in there if it can make a case for itself and if it can convince other people. The up-coming generation is one which seeks to travel light even though it is really rather acquisitive and knows the price of everything. But it presupposes a number of things which,

increasingly, will be readily available to those who are young and those who can generate wealth: international travel; work which accrues to those who have transferable skills in a world which moves and develops at a fast pace. In the religious sphere, it opens up a serious and significant 'divide' between those religions which are traditional in terms of static authority and those religions which, from within their own resources, find it easier to cope with changing patterns and models of authority which are responsive to ever-changing scenarios. Within Christianity, the Fresh Expressions of Church are part of such a post-modern ethos and scenario. The difficulties really start where conservatism meets innovation. Conservatism sees little more than the superficiality in the post-modern novelty; innovation sees little more than the stagnation of what has been inherited. At its worst we see different types of Christianity caught up in an end-game between opportunism and certainty. It goes further and we get a trench-warfare between: liberal and conservative; inclusive and exclusive; orthodoxy and heterodoxy. All of this is offered daily in the newspapers. To any onlooker of another World Religion, it seems as if Christianity is not so much internally diverse as intrinsically incoherent. My own experience of Inter Faith encounter is that people of Faiths other than our own cannot endure it if we pretend that what matters most to us does not matter at all.

The *clash of civilizations* is another phrase which rolls off the tongue. This is directly related to the overlap of religion and culture and has contributed significantly to the current 'branding' and distortion of Christianity as a World Religion which is simply a vehicle of the worst excesses of Western capitalism and decadence. The migration of people is something which we should never underestimate nor indeed the personal power of an individual to draw and inspire both loyalty and hatred. It has happened before throughout history and it is happening now. 9/11 is one of those defining moments in the life of anyone who was alive on the day it happened. My daughter had just returned from National School and I wandered into the kitchen and saw the footage of the first plane ploughing into the towers. Neither she nor I really took it in. I went on to the Hospice in Cork to visit a parishioner and that parishioner and her

daughter-in-law were watching it on the television in the room. By this stage, there was a second one and people were tracking a plane in and around Washington. The human tragedy was very clear to us in Cork because in one particular family a brother worked in The Twin Towers and survived; his sister and her daughter were in one of the planes which ploughed into The Twin Towers and did not survive. I attended the Requiem Mass for the family and the combination of loss, bereavement, confusion and incredulity I will never forget. I am not much good at maths, even worse at economics – but I remember a Muslim friend of mine who is an artist in West Cork saying to me: For me, Michael, the problem with Christianity is usury. Seven years on from 9/11 I now can see what his chance remark was about. The current 'credit crunch,' 'economic downturn' or any other sound-byte we might want to use – seems to me, in a strange and almost wistful way, to fulfil the agenda of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. The fundamentalist today is not always someone who wanders around brandishing a holy book of whatever religion. He or she is in fact probably some sort of scientist. Osama bin Laden I understand trained as an engineer. We saw medical doctors in Glasgow mounting a might security challenge to the airport authorities there not long ago. Usury in our terms is mortgages and credit. Christianity among of the Abrahamic Faiths seems to be able to assimilate usury into its religio-cultural system without seeing the moral dilemma. In this regard we are an affront to Islam and Judaism. My own thoughts are that bin Laden was mounting an attack on the whole economic system of the West and, in retrospect if not also in prospect, The War in Iraq handed on a plate the head of Western Christianity to radical Islamic terrorism. But I fully accept that many of you may well disagree, as is your entitlement which I respect. The continuing bad news about the banking system, the discussion which everyone is now able to hold about sub-prime mortgages and so forth in a sense flows from all of this.

My own work in relation to the Inter faith area raises for me many interesting and important issues. Lambeth 1988 and Lambeth 1998 called, with increasing urgency, for work in the area of understanding of the way of life and encounter with those of other Faiths. I have to say in

parentheses that nowhere in my travels in this area of Inter Faith encounter have I seen what I saw in the parish neighbouring on this parish, St Thomas' in Eglantine Avenue. I was privileged to be invited to attend the re-dedication of work done to the interior of the church; the imam was present at the Eucharist; the imam shared the peace; the imam and his community were prayed for in a Christian church.

In 2005 I was invited to accompany the archbishop of Canterbury to Pakistan through my work with NIFCON. It was an extraordinary trip for its coverage of ground both human and geographical. One minute you might be taking part in a highly stylized discussion about the civic rights of Christians, at another minute you might be sitting cross-legged on the floor talking to mothers and children who were together being taught literacy and numeracy or a skill such as sewing or beading in a church hall. The whole trip was a security nightmare as the archbishop of Canterbury is a high-risk person in terms of international religious terrorism. There was one particular incident when we were there – a case of persecution of Christians in a country district which had resulted in the church being burned down. As you might expect, the archbishop was under continuing pressure to come out and condemn. It took place in an area where historically there had been Presbyterian missionary activity and what in fact happened was the following. A Christian and a Muslim were playing cards – for money – and the Christian man defeated his Muslim friend 'hands down.' The Muslim left in anger and set fire to a small hut in which pages which had fallen out in the mosque from copies of the Koran were placed, out of respect for the Holy Book – *and* he spread the rumour in the village that the Christian man had done this. In response, the other Muslim men in the village set fire to the Christian church and the Christians in turn retaliated. My point is that this was not an internationally contrived response to prevent Inter Faith encounter in Pakistan; it was an act of opportunism on the part of one individual who had lost money in a game of cards which, presumably in the context of his own religion strictly understood, he should not have been playing. We also spent time in Peshawar in the Northern Provinces where we participated in the dedication of a new Christian Church in the name

of St Matthew, himself no stranger to Inter Faith encounter and conflict. This was built in what you could only call the slum area beyond the city boundaries where Muslim and Christian had to rub along with one another in what basically was and is a shanty-town which could be bulldozed in the morning by some developer. Where two streets met at right-angles there was a mosque and a new Anglican church. We were greeted by both communities with peace. Peshawar is a very difficult place. Of course there is the romance of the Khyber Pass but it is almost impossible to live normally, with the Taliban in your back-yard. Bishop Mano Ramalshah spoke passionately at Lambeth 2008 on conversion. He put it very clearly: Conversion in Pakistan to Christianity is to invite certain death.

In 2007 I was invited to Kaduna in Northern Nigeria, to lead a Consultation on Christianity and Citizenship in Africa. We did this out of the understanding that Western Christianity, through its mission and marching hand in hand with its merchants, has had a considerable influence on shaping contemporary Africa. It is part of what we call the dilemma of post-colonialism. Kaduna was chosen because in 2002 there had been Inter Faith riots, the origin and course of which again is interesting to plot. Kaduna State declared itself politically Sharia-compliant. This made massive assumptions in a country where there was supposed to be a secular, properly called, democracy. A list of signatures compiled to object to this was delivered to the Government Buildings. On the way back the objectors who were Christian were taunted, attacked and, in turn, retaliated. This set in train a period of three days' and nights' rioting in which official figures suggest 3,000 but unofficial figures suggest 30,000 people dead. What tipped the balance in such a fraught situation was the error of judgement on the part of the Chief of Police who used the Muslim police to sort out the Christian rioters and the Christian police to sort out the Muslim rioters. The Anglican archbishop, Josiah, and his Muslim counterpart, Mahdi, decided that they must do something about it. So they started to play squash together. They came up with the phrase 'peaceful co-existence' which may well not sound terribly scintillating but it was and remains what they felt that they could aspire to achieve. This, of course, has landed Josiah in

tremendous trouble with those higher up the food-chain in the Anglican Province of Nigeria because: his co-operation with the Muslims in a religious way is interpreted as a corrupting Western influence on him because it is a way of engagement which does not issue in conversions to Christianity in a church which is very proud of its numerical expansion. This is surely an irony in that the Muslim world is seen in part to be blaming Western decadence for the state of the world and the Christian world is blaming Inter Faith co-operation for disloyalty to the Christian cause.

Fundamentalism is a complicated word and too intricate for this time of my talk. Suffice it to say that we do need to talk about it both internally to Christianity and in relation to other Faiths if we are to get a grasp of why there are such tremendous

difficulties and what is happening in relation to living in Multi-Faith Communities. Convictions and caricatures differ and we need to sort them out and agree a mode of discourse which, to my mind, is exactly what I mean by dialogue. I leave you, however, with a very uncomfortable thought. The Western world takes for granted the individual's capacity to purchase what she or cannot in fact afford at that moment. This is what Islam calls usury. And this, I think, is what Osama bin Laden was challenging when the Twin Towers of New York were destroyed in 9/11. If we can, within the framework of Christian hope and doctrine address the devastating human loss of life on that fateful day – we are still left with the question: Is there any Christianity today which exercises influence without capitalism?