

LIVING WITH DIVERSITY - 2016 SEEFF CONFERENCE

1 September 2016, Christ Church College, Oxford

Sixty people gathered in the College's Blue Boar lecture theatre to listen and discuss the Butler-Sloss Commission's Report on the *Place of Belief and Faith in British Public Life*.

The Right Revd Bishop Colin Fletcher, Acting Bishop of Oxford had sent a message of support, and our Conference began with the reading of it. In it he commended to SEEFF the necessity for its work promoting good inter-faith relations

The Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, Mr Tim Stevenson opened the Conference welcoming the delegates to the city and county. He explained a little about the work of a Lord Lieutenant and, with community building being an important part of his representation of Her Majesty the Queen, he expressed his encouragement to SEEFF for its work

The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church welcomed us to the College and then, as **Chair of SEEFF, Bede Gerrard** welcomed people on behalf of its Board, before handing over to Hugh Boulter, a member of the SEEFF Board and of the Diocese of Oxford's group for interfaith issues, who was to enable the day.

The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy gave the keynote lecture, considering the place of faith and belief in his life. For ten years he had been the principal of Ripon-Cuddesdon Theological College with a particular of interest in the sociology of contemporary religion. The society within which we practise our faith is changing. In the past few years the rate of change has been increasing, with values becoming less and less shared across generations - young people no longer sharing their elders' values on the religious or spiritual life. He gave three examples to illustrate his point.

Taking his son to his secondary school he had to wait in an area in which a poster showed the school's values: Recycle; No bullying; Respect for all. Not exactly-earth shattering or a complete code for life; in a Victorian school the Ten Commandments might have been displayed. While knowing that things have moved on first put forward, he considered that as values those listed on the poster were rather superficial.

For some time he had served as an advisor on the censorship of British films. Asked by a school headmaster to talk to the sixth form on his work, he had included some illustrative material with examples of nudity, swearing, horror, and other questionable material. Watching the headmaster squirm at the material and look real uncomfortable, Martyn challenged him as to why he found such things wrong. The change in values seemed to Martyn to show that today's young people are more sensitive and aware than those of the 1970s. Some of the instances included were from whole series which have now become unbroadcastable because of their lack of political correctness, their overt racism or sexism. In many ways today's values are an improvement on those of Martyn's youth, and on the whole he considered that things have changed for the better.

Martyn's third illustration was of the parents from the school where his son was an eight year old pupil, being up in arms about a letter concerning a St George's Day Parade Sunday. The letter had made three requirements of the pupils: their kit should be clean, their shoes should be shiny, and the parade was **compulsory** for all pupils. The demand for clean kit and the directive to have well-shone shoes was not the cause of the complaint, but the compulsory nature of the parade. The default position for the parents was that it was all a matter of choice: for them, there was no question of expectations which had to be fulfilled if their son was to remain a part of the school scout troop. That change to **choice** of action has entered into all aspects of most of

our lives. In Martyn's childhood there had been a real expectation that church services were to be attended not just *once* on Sunday but often three times. That is something that has lessened, if not disappeared over time, and Martyn was sure that there was a similar drift across all faith traditions. Today is the age of **rights** with little regard to the obligations we have in what he calls a 'consumerist society'. We can choose what we like, and discard it when we no longer feel the need to do something. The problem within our congregations is not one of secularism or of atheism but of consumerism.

The age of 'Red Letter' Feast days or of 'Days of Obligation' is being lost. If a Feast which is properly kept on a particular date falls on a weekday, it is often moved to a convenient nearby Sunday; we do what we want to do when we want to do it. When the terms 'regular', 'frequent', 'occasional' are applied to church attendance they no longer have a consistent meaning, and the same also seems to be happening to other faith traditions in the west. Alongside this, people seem to lack the need to apply to themselves the requirements of their membership of a faith tradition.

The quality and quantity of (accurate) religious information seems to be leading to a drift into a moralistic theism, but because of its lack of substance - density - this moralistic theism is unable to withstand the current consumerism. This is seen in the rise of the 'Nones'; people who might once have ticked the Church of England' box when asked on a questionnaire for their religious affiliation now tick the 'None' box - at the last census nearly half the population were 'Nones'. Only 10% of the population say that they are religious; they may define themselves as spiritual (up to 80%) and even express a belief in a divine being, but they have no connection with any worshipping congregation of any particular tradition and may hold an eclectic collection of beliefs often not from one particular faith tradition. Belief in an afterlife alongside a belief in reincarnation is common, beliefs which to the theologian which are seemingly incompatible. Only thirty years ago 76% of the population continued in the tradition they were born into, but this now applies to only 36%.

We live in a society of choice, but is there too much choice? Is choice always good for us? Cries of 'Where are the youth?' come from almost every congregation; but a third of the population are over sixty-five; where are **they**? We need to reflect. But what about young people? Society seems to have changed: the onset of puberty comes earlier, but adulthood later. Well into their twenties, young people do not want to be called adults: you are one of 'the boys' or one of 'the girls'. Adolescence is longer, the age of responsibility is getting later, let us have a good time, pension saving can wait, there is no need to make a will when I start earning.

Martyn finished by offering us three reflections from a Jewish teacher: Jesus.

'You are the salt of the earth' (Matthew 5) - often misunderstood and wrongly translated. Does it really mean NaCl, table salt? Probably not. It is the same word used for the 'salts' from the shores of the Dead Sea, salts which were used as fertilizer, and the word used for 'earth' is not that for the planet but for its soil. Should we take the saying to mean that we 'are the fertilizer of the soil'. If so, there are things to know about fertilizer: it is harmful when used to excess, but very profitable when spread out thinly throughout the ground. What matters is getting the proportion right and then spreading it evenly throughout.

'You are the light of the world' (Matthew 5) - light is present not for its own benefit but for that of others.

'The kingdom of God is like the yeast a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until it was all leaven' (Matthew 13).

Martyn concluded that in each of these cases the quantity is small, but it has an effect on the whole community. A few people of faith can have a disproportionate effect. Those who hold a belief hold a responsibility for their ability to have an effect out of proportion to their numbers.

Martyn certainly left us with something to ponder

After a coffee and tea break came our second keynote speaker.

Imam Ibrahim Mogra, Muslim Council of Britain introduced himself as being someone born in Malawi, where he was treated as being part of the 'white' community. But in his youth he migrated with his family to the UK where he was treated as part of the 'black' community. This change in social position deeply impressed him in his youth and he determined to make the UK his home, finding that after a time it became natural for him to describe himself as English. When he was studying abroad and the local people asked about his nationality, they failed to believe his reply that he was 'English' and asked where he was really from.

Ibrahim echoed Martyn Percy's statement that the religious landscape of Britain has changed; while over half the population say that they have no religious affiliation, alongside this the proportion of people who belong to a non-Christian faith tradition has risen to 10%. This shows a marked decline in the practice of a faith at the same time as a great increase in the diversity of belief.

The religiously-attributed conflicts in Asia, the Middle East and Africa have an impact on British life which is reflected in the social coherence of local communities. There is a great need to recognise and live with difference and each community needs to be at ease within itself in a society where all members feel part of the community.

He and his family live in Leicester and consider themselves English. His children were born in England and choose to speak only English: if they are asked a question in Gujarati they will reply in English. He reflected on his own children's attitude of to worship. One day on the way to the mosque for Friday prayers he met his son walking in the opposite direction. When he asked 'Why?', the response was that the sermon was not being given in English, that they did not appreciate this, and that they would return in ten minutes when the prayers would be said. This brought out two traits of modern youth: unwillingness to listen to things 'in foreign', and lack of patience to wait until the problem is past. But they still feel that they need to fill the time with what they consider is needed from them. Faith must not be confused with culture.

In many ways Leicester is a diversity success story. Over the years an understanding has been created of what 'tolerance and respect' mean in UK society and the local community, the need for a shared understanding of what constitutes the 'common good': following the rule of law with free choice and mutual respect.

Islam teaches that human beings are characterised by interdependence. No one can be considered to be a true believer if their neighbour is not safe from harm. Is the tongue used to cause harm? Words can produce a lasting harm that it is difficult to mend. Freedom of speech cannot be exercised without respect for others' feelings. And nobody can be a true believer if they and their family go to bed well-fed and clothed while their neighbour is cold and hungry.

There is a need for accurate religious literacy. For this to happen we need to learn about other faiths from *practitioners* of that faith, people who live it. We may *know* the tenets of a faith not our own, but if we do not pray or worship within it there is always something missing. We need to acknowledge that there is a large area of commonality between faiths, but that there are also differences which need to be considered. And we need to keep in mind the fact that there is often, along with the religious dogma, a large cultural content in the way a specific faith is held.

Within the recommendations there was no requirement for each of the Butler Sloss Report's Commissioners to agree with every recommendation. For example, questions about the presence of Church of England bishops as members of the House of Lords, or of the Queen being also Supreme Governor of the Church of England, are not a concern for the Muslim Council of Britain and, similarly, state schools with a particular Christian ethos are considered by many to benefit the moral and ethical education of

all their pupils. What *is* in the recommendations is a pattern of how UK society might develop to produce a society that holds respect and freedom as guiding principles.

The guiding principle of dialogue could be 'each must take responsibility'.

After these first two presentations there was a question and answer sessions with the speakers. (Due to his needing to leave to care for a sick relative, Martyn Percy asked the Archdeacon of Oxford, Revd Martin Gorick, to substitute for him at Q & A.) Many of the questions concerned the issue of local faith groups and how they could increase their effectiveness in a climate in which there was little or no funding for inter-faith initiatives.

A vegan lunch was followed by the SEEFF AGM, during which time twenty-five people had the opportunity to tour Christ Church Cathedral, led by verger Jim Godfrey.

Following this the Conference heard short reports from some of those who are involved with interfaith work at a very practical level.

Rabbi Norman Solomon spoke briefly about the origins and work of the Woolf Institute (www.woolf.cam.ac.uk). Founded in Cambridge in 1998, it is now a global leader in the academic study of relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims; its work is practical as well as theoretical, covering such varied matters as the importance of trust in everyday life, the role of religion in international diplomacy, and improving end of life care in local hospices. The founder and current director of the institute, Dr Edward Kessler OBE, had been a supporter of Norman's at what was then the Centre for the Study of Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations at the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham.

Fakhera Rehman, Kirklees Faiths Forum Fakhera Rehman's contribution to the wellbeing and development of Kirklees communities in her role as coordinator at Kirklees Faiths Forum means that she has received an award for her service to the family and community. Fakhera, who lives in Dewsbury, described herself as a 'mum, a proud Yorkshire-woman and a Muslim'. She is passionate about working to build bridges within the community. 'I want to make Dewsbury a better place for my son to grow up in'. In her work for Kirklees Faiths Forum she has been responsible for many initiatives in the community to bring together people from many faith traditions. Since funding for the Forum has been withdrawn, she has been less able to continue these projects.

The model she gave of the sequence of violence between faiths gave an insight into the reasons behind her involvement. The culmination of violence is seen as the apex of a triangle, its base consisting of underlying ignorance and fear of the unknown. This can develop into the growth of prejudice and false assumptions about the motives of those who differ from oneself. When it finds no other outlet this prejudice can lead into violence and conflict. False accusations about a community, the criminal actions of a small number of individuals from a different tradition, can lead to the whole of the faith tradition being accused because of the criminality. The role of the media is often to encourage the confrontation by imbalanced reporting or the sensationalising of news stories. The abuse can begin as verbal, grow to petty violence, and may ultimately lead to strong violence against a community. As a result, the reaction to this prejudice and abuse may encourage sections of the abused community to resort to terrorism.

Offering hospitality to the abusers can defuse the violence and take away the motivation of the possible terrorist. Fakhera has seen the change within communities when a culture which is alien to some, and the content of a faith, has been explained. She is confident that she could only have achieved what she has done by remaining firm in her own faith, belonging to her local community, and taking as full a part as she can within it.

Fakhera was able to see the faults within her own faith tradition as expressed in the local mosques where women are often excluded from the prayer room and no space given to them to gather for worship. After the Twin Towers terror the Islamic community needed to firmly proclaim that those actions were not expressing that community's - or Fakhera's - faith. Similarly the backlash from local communities against Muslims after the 7/7 London bombings and the death of Gunner Rigby produced actions that needed to be faced honestly by the local people. The increase of graffiti and casual verbal abuse and violence within the district was there to be faced and answered.

Cultural aspects of a faith tradition need separating from the content of a faith, for from within different cultures there can be different attitudes towards the elements which are thought essential within other cultures. There is a need to go beyond the culture to the *essence* of the faith; to show that requirements of modesty and commitment to times of prayer can vary within a religion. It must be borne in mind that no faith is monolithic, and that there are different schools of thought and 'denominations' within all faith traditions. The major problem comes from the 'puritan' element, where a group will define themselves as the only true believers and say that others, even those claiming to be of the same faith, are not true members of it. Such 'purists' occur in all faiths, and sometimes they have to be left out of the dialogue, respected with their difference but at the same time showing respect for all people of faith.

There can be no way of forcing dialogue; it has to be real and based on honesty and respect. Ways of overcoming difference often lie in simple things, found through mapping the faiths which there are in the neighbourhood. Social events can forward friendship through faith, and the many things people of faith have in common can enhance dialogue whilst still respecting the differences. Much is still to be done but the withdrawal of funding has hampered dialogue.

Rabbi Norman Solomon, Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish studies As a member of the Commission producing the Woolf Report Norman acknowledged that not all the recommendations were equally supported by all Commissioners. He stressed that being firm in one's own faith was an essential for effective inter-faith dialogue. He was also insistent that being a person of faith did not correspond to 'ticking the appropriate boxes' and assenting to approved doctrines; being a person of faith means to live in integrity within the parameters of the faith, but not being afraid to question them. As a young Rabbi he was asked by a young person 'Do Jews believe in life after death?'. He replied 'Yes', but before he could expand on this the young person said 'Thank you' and walked off - the box had been ticked. For many, ticking the right boxes is equivalent to holding their faith. To others, the cultural and community aspects of faith matter more than the tenets of their religion. The balance between these is what can develop into effective dialogue.

Norman noted that the Report was being taken seriously by SEEFF, and hoped that local Faith Forums and Councils of Faiths would take up its recommendations and find ways to bring them into local practice.

Jeremy Rodell, British Humanist Association Jeremy began by saying that most Humanists would agree that science / evidence is the best way to understand the universe, that there is no need to postulate a deity or a supernatural realm, and that we have only a single life. The responsibility we then have is that we must think for ourselves and in the light of evidence be willing to change our minds. Man has no special or God-given place in creation. We're human animals with emotions and subjective experiences. These experiences can be enriched by relationships, arts and culture; hence we are able to give our lives meaning and purpose.

Most Humanists would contend that we are social animals with evolved empathy and compassion, and it is this feature of our shared humanity which explains why

some form of the Golden Rule – treat others as you would wish to be treated – has appeared across so many religions and philosophies. On this basis, our actions should be guided by their likely effects on the well-being or suffering of other people (and other animals) and consequences for society as a whole.

Jeremy then showed a series of charts and tables showing the change in the proportions of beliefs with British society, and expanded their relevance for today. The current British population is split almost equally between those who identify as religious and those who do not. In future we will have a substantial minority who hold a variety of religious views across a spectrum of religious traditions, but with higher average religiosity than in the past; and a majority who profess no religious allegiance or belief and hold a variety of non-religious beliefs & practices, of whom about half hold a broadly humanistic world view, and among whom identities are evolving.

What, then, are the challenges in this diverse society? Polarisation, lack of social cohesion; uninformed generalisations about ‘The Other’; the elision of faith-based & race-based prejudice; declining institutions defending their privileges; conflicting values.

And how does the Humanist respond?

The Strategy of the British Humanist Association (BHA) states that ‘*We want a world where everyone lives cooperatively on the basis of shared human values, respect for human rights, and concern for future generations.*’ BHA Values include: *being cooperative; working with others of different beliefs for the common good.*

Jeremy proposed three Humanist responses: Secularism; Education; and Dialogue. Secularism means that the State remains neutral in matters of religion & belief, while protecting universal human rights.

Secularism does not mean an enforced atheism or humanism; nor does it deny the important role that Christianity has played in British and European culture and history, including art, music, architecture and shared narratives. And it means defending the right to freedom of thought and expression, including the right to religious belief and practice, provided it does not erode the rights of others. But it also means that religions are given no special privilege, and that the democratically-determined law is applied equally to all.

In preparation for life in a plural society, all children need high-quality education about religious and non-religious beliefs, values and ethics. Such education needs to be enshrined in the national curriculum and to include non-religious world-views, such as Humanism.. All pupils should also receive good quality education about sex and relationships, curiosity, thinking skills, creativity, shared values and citizenship..

A person is not a good citizen - and here Jeremy said that he agreed with both Martyn and Ibrahim - if he and his family go to bed well-fed and with a home when his neighbour is without food or shelter.

Jeremy felt that an end should be made to faith-based admissions to state-funded schools and, within state-funded schools, to compulsory communal Christian worship - as opposed to other types of whole school activities. Ultimately, the British Humanist Association wants to see state-funded faith schools phased out

Importantly, it was essential for us all to see those who are different firstly as fellow human beings, for whom their religion or belief is just one element of their personal identity.

While debate has its place, we should do more to seek dialogue, where the aim is *understanding* rather than *winning*. During dialogue the most important element is listening, avoiding assumptions and generalisations while recognising areas of disagreement, and looking for common ground, whilst being aware of ‘red lines’ beyond which dialogue is not useful.

Whatever we do, whether at public events or in private dialogues, we need to bear

in mind the type of plural society we want: extreme multiculturalism, where different communities lead parallel lives without meaningful interaction, or forced assimilation, where differences are ironed out, or a very British, messy form of integration or 'inter-culturalism' where we benefit from both our diversity and our shared values.

Bede Gerrard, Chair of SEEFF ended the day with a short review of both what had been said - and also of what had not been said.

He had been at the launch of the Report at the House of Lords, and he was told how the Lady Speaker had held up the Report in the House and said that she 'wholeheartedly recommended this *radical* Report'.

'Radical' - it is important how we use words, and the meanings that we give to them. Often in inter-faith dialogue we can find ourselves using words with different or nuanced meanings from the way in which those same words are understood by others in the dialogue.

Bede drew attention to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan's writing on the 'common word' (love) in his *Open Letter*. At a discussion on the *Letter* at Regent's Park College, Oxford it was found that even with the word 'love' there were nuanced meanings across faith traditions. We are all, of course, sure we know what 'love' means, but when it comes to defining it there are subtleties that need to be accepted. We need to love one another, but we also need to know what we intend by using that word. The same is true whenever we discuss concepts across faiths.

Bede thanked people for making the *Living with Diversity* day such a success, and asked everyone, across the differences of our faiths, to take home with them love in their hearts for each other.