SCOTTISH INTERFAITH WEEK LECTURE

Interfaith Week

I’m delighted to have the opportunity of speaking in Scottish Interfaith Week. ‘A Challenge for a time like this’ reminds us that it is hard to imagine a time at which the question of how people of different faiths and cultures might live together harmoniously and in mutual respect has been more important and more urgent. Scottish Interfaith Week draws attention to and celebrates the diversity of Scotland today – and it draws attention to the way in which faith and expressions of faith are one of the most visible ways in which we see that diversity in our society. Our friendship and our desire to know about and to learn from one another are important building blocks for a harmonious and diverse society.

I thought I should share with you just a flavour of how I experience those inter-faith relationships. For the Scottish Episcopal Church, interfaith relationships have long been a priority – in the establishment of the charmingly named CROPOF which stands for Committee for Relationship with People of Other Faiths. We’ve renamed one or two of our committees lately – the somewhat colonialist Overseas Committee has become the Global Partnerships Committee. And maybe CROPOF could do with a name which seems rather less to assume that we measure everything against the centrality of Christian faith. Earlier this year, I took part in a meeting of Faith Leaders around the cabinet table of the Scottish Government in Bute House, which is the official residence of the First Minister. This invitation from the First Minister was a remarkable statement of the priority which she gives to this area of work. She chaired the meeting. She knew all the participants by name. We talked at length about the involvement of our diverse faith communities in Scottish society. In the SEC we take a small amount of pride in the development of is now called the ‘Just’ Festival – formerly the Festival of Spirituality and Peace. It has had an important role in highlighting interfaith relationships and in introducing to a wider audience the richness of our faith traditions.

But there is one event which I look back on as having been particularly thought-provoking for me. I was one of a group of faith leaders who visited STV and as part of that visit were linked in a dialogue with schools across Scotland. The questions were not about churches as institutions. What the young people wanted to know about was spirituality and prayer, about the reality of a life of faith. Those questions were for me the expression of what we sometimes call the Post-Modern Society – a society which has no interest in religious institutions or authority but wants to know about faith and spiritual experience. It was our partner faith leaders who spoke with the greatest conviction and authority in response to these questions. I was humbled by that.

I want this evening to mention and explore two issues which make this Interfaith Week particularly significant

The Video

The first is the controversy surrounding the Church of England’s Video and the refusal of the cinema chains to screen it even though it had been passed by the appropriate boards. The cinemas said that their policy was not to accept political or religious advertising. They are perfectly entitled to that policy – although it begs the question whether all the rest of their advertising is somehow neutral. I am particularly aware at present for example of the extent to which advertising invites us to enter into unrestrained materialism – and I’m thinking particularly of the Christmas advertising directed at small children. The mistake which the cinemas made, in my view, was to suggest that this advertisement ‘might be offensive’

Some of you may have seen the advertisement. It is a 60 second hearing of the Lord’s Prayer. People in various situations and roles say a line of the prayer in a way which links it to their daily life and work. There is no comment – no selling of anything. It is not an attempt to package religion or to sell a religious brand. I think it was a genuine attempt to evoke faith in a society in which that faith response tends to go dormant under the pressure of our secular culture.

But offensive? I think that the values of Scottish Interfaith Week include a recognition that we can all appreciate one another’s faith without necessarily needing to share it. It’s about recognising that we are all in the world of faith – all attempting to stir in people a deep faith response when much of the rest of our society wants us to believe that there is nothing more – nothing more than what we see and experience – nothing deeper which lies behind that – nothing which calls us to a deeper ‘soul engagement’ with our own lives and the life of the world.

It also, as I shall suggest in a moment, calls us to explore what we mean when we talk about a diverse or a multicultural society. I don’t believe such a society can be one in which we are offended simply by hearing the views or the faith of others – unless of course what we hear is fundamentalist, exclusive, prejudicial or hostile.

Impact of Paris

The recent events in Paris have been shocking beyond all imaging. But of course they come in a sequence of similar events which began in recent memory with 9/11 and 7/7 and with previous atrocities in Paris, Tunisia and recently in Beruit.

Governments have a primary responsibility to protect their citizens. But of course there is a difficult line between doing what is necessary to protect citizens – increased police presence on the street, tighter border controls and many more – and attempts to satisfy a natural desire for punitive vengeance. President Hollande, for example, has said that France will be merciless in response to the attacks in Paris. Of course – and yet, writing in last week’s Guardian, Canon Giles Fraser drew attention to the risk that we may be drawn into mimetic violence. By that he meant a violence which simply mirrors the violence of the other so that we are drawn into an ever-deepening spiral of violence which doesn’t necessarily make us any safer. It is the nature of all conflict that it tends to become directly binary and adversarial, that any middle ground in which mature consideration might take place is simply squeezed out.

Speaking in the Orwell Lecture at University College, London, last week, Archbishop Rowan Williams said that ‘somehow the obstinate attempt to make sense of those who are determined to make no sense of me is one of the things which divides civilisation from barbarism, faith from emptiness. You have to try.’ Archbishop Williams said that he was not advocating ‘sentimental illusions that all you had to do was to be nice to people’ – but that you had to make an attempt to ‘imagine the other’ And then he said that ‘the hardest thing we face at the moment is that: how do we imagine the unimaginable mentality of somebody who thinks that God or justice or the future .. is honoured by slaughter or barbarity.’

RELIGION AND SECTARIANISM – THE FATAL WEAKNESS

Let’s move a little closer specifically to what we explore together in Scottish Interfaith Week.

Many of you will know that I am Irish – a member of the small southern Irish minority protestant community by my birth in Dublin and my family - and that I lived and worked most of my adult life in Northern Ireland. I was living in Belfast and aged 18 when the Troubles began. I was 54 when I moved to Scotland in 2005. I have a family story in ministry which goes back primarily to the ministry of my maternal grandfather, Ernest Bateman, who was ordained in 1911. That ministry in Southern Ireland, Northern Ireland – and to a limited degree in Scotland – has been profoundly shaped by questions of how faith and identity – identity both cultural and political – interact with one another. And when that relationship between faith and identity goes wrong, it becomes toxic very quickly and becomes what we know in both Ireland and Scotland as sectarianism.

In the book ‘Moving beyond Sectarianism’ by Cecelia Clegg and Joe Leichty – Cecelia Clegg recently retired from teaching at New College here in Edinburgh – they describe sectarianism as ‘a system of attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures at personal, communal and institutional levels which always involves religion and typically involves a negative mixing of religion and politics’. The Moving Beyond Sectarianism project was established by the Irish School of Ecumenics. As I lived through the long years of the Troubles – particularly in the last 19 years when I was Rector of a parish in Portadown and greatly preoccupied with the parading issues around the Orange Order – that research gave me a grammar – a way of understanding how religion could be everywhere in the Northern Ireland Troubles while at the same time understanding that the conflict was not primarily a religious war.

I learnt that religion can act as a ‘marker’ for division without being the primary root of that division in itself. I gradually came to believe that there is what I have sometimes called a fatal weakness in religion. That weakness is its apparent inability to prevent it being borrowed in the cause of political and cultural movements which are not in themselves religious. Religion serves to tug the heartstrings and to give an ultimate authority to positions which in themselves are not of ultimate significance.

And what is Islamic Jihadist terrorism but another example of the same thing. Muslims across the world say, ‘Not in my name’ and ‘Our faith is not about this kind of violence and division’ And yet they and we seem powerless to prevent that happening. In that context we hear again the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams referring to the ‘unimaginable mentality somebody who thinks that God or justice or the future .. is honoured by slaughter or barbarity.’

I think that Jesus also said and did things which showed that he could be hostile to what we regard as religion – rather than spirituality or faith. He drove the money changers and traders out of the temple saying ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’. He was constantly in conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees and their religion of letter rather than spirit. He makes those of us who are professionals in religion squirm as he tells the story of the Good Samaritan where priest and Levite pass by on the other side and the Samaritan who is ‘other’ to the Jew is the one who renders aid.

In a sense, that brings us back to my earlier memory of the dialogue between faith leaders and teenagers at STV. What they wanted was faith and spirituality. And some of us where challenged not to want to give them institutional religion.

So let us move on finally to consider where all this leads and what kind of society Scottish Interfaith Week challenges us to build.

Firstly I think that the events in Paris and other places make it inevitable that, if we are to be safer in a dangerous world, we are going to find ourselves living with more restrictions and intrusion in our lives than has been the case in recent years. I spent most of my life living with an extraordinarily high level of surveillance – never at all reassured by the suggestion that ‘the innocent have nothing to fear’. We lived in Northern Ireland with searches in shopping areas, with locked doors in shops and restaurants, with tight border controls. We had to identify our bags on the tarmac before we boarded the plane. But I would to be honest prefer that to another stirring of the cycles of mimetic violence which is undertaken with no particular end in view other than that of being merciless. The violence which we face is deeply embedded in poverty, in bad and unresolved history and in mistaken readings of religion. It is not susceptible to simplistic and violent approaches to wiping it out.

Secondly we need a serious public debate about the kind of diverse society which we are building here in Scotland and in the rest of Britain. People talk easily about multiculturalism. They sometimes take about it as an experiment which has failed. But I don’t think that we have talked about it thoughtfully and seriously. The questions are ‘How much engagement and integration do we need in order to have a society which we can in any sense say has unity?’ And ‘how much distinctiveness and separation do we need to enable religious and cultural traditions which can bring colour and diversity to us to flourish?’ Those are very difficult questions and the answers are going to be finely balanced. Those questions are experienced in the freedoms – freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and most of all freedom of worship – which we prize so much. They surface in a particularly challenging way around education policy and the question of faith schools.

Then I think that it calls us to become much more intentional about how we develop our interfaith relationships here in Scotland and elsewhere. One of my oldest friends is the recently retired Bishop of Leicester, Tim Stevens. He and others such as Revd Andrew Wingate have worked over many years at interfaith work in Leicester. Their success has been seen in the failure of the BNP in spite of many attempts to gain a foothold there.

We need to do the same. We need to get to know one another better on a personal level. We need to understand how one another’s communities work. We need to think about whether there are parts of one anothers traditions which we can share. Can we work together in the relief of poverty – as we already do in Food Banks. Can present austerity give us the opportunity of sharing in the wonderful Sikh tradition of feeding people in the Gurdwara. Can we explore together how together we might represent the idea of faith to a society which is very secular.