

Talk given at NSW Ecumenical Council Fundraising Dinner

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As I pondered what I might say at this ecumenical dinner tonight I was reminded of a Zen story I heard some while ago:

The Farmer's Luck

There was once an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing this news, his neighbours came to visit.

“Such bad luck”, they said sympathetically.

“Maybe”, the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned bringing with it two other wild horses.

“Such good luck!” the neighbours exclaimed.

“Maybe”, replied the farmer.

The following day his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown off and broke his leg.

Again, the neighbors came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune.

“Such bad luck”, they commiserated

“Maybe”, answered the farmer.

The day after that, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army to fight in a war. Seeing the son's leg was broken, they passed him by.

“Such good luck!” cried the neighbours.

“Maybe”, said the farmer.

I thought that – maybe – in a world of fluctuating fortunes I might reflect a little on an area which I think is becoming increasingly interesting – the interface between ecumenism and interfaith dialogue.

Although I have been involved in ecumenism at an informal level as well as in formal forums for many years, in more recent times I think my focus has changed somewhat. In some sense ecumenical issues have taken more of a back seat and my interests have become more directed towards interfaith concerns. But is this necessarily a bad thing? For, paradoxically, at the same time this change of focus and direction has also reinforced for me the significance of Christian unity. Because the church is not an end in itself. Its calling lies within the wider context of concern for the world. So I would like to reflect tonight, from my experience of both the ecumenical and interfaith movements, how I believe that they might inform, challenge and enrich each other.

I notice that some acknowledgment of this tension between the older ecumenical movement and the more recent interfaith movement in Australia is also found in the recently published book edited by Catherine Clifford “A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity”, which marks more than 100 years of Christian prayer for unity. Catherine

Clifford states in her introduction that “if we are not in a full blown ‘winter’ of the ecumenical movement, we have nevertheless been through a real ‘cooling off’ period in the past decade of interchurch relationships”. She notes that “in light of recent international conflicts and rising rates of immigration to the West by men and women of other religious traditions, the question of religious pluralism and of interreligious dialogue often captures the imagination more readily today than matters of unity among the Christian churches”. This might seem to be especially so in the case of younger people.

In another chapter Sr Minke de Vries describes this ecumenical winter as having taken a certain hold at the structural level of the churches, with fear of the other, fear of change and a nostalgic wish to return to the past as its dominant characteristics. Churches seem to have lost contact with the wider vision. As they become more and more bogged down in discussions about the finer points of doctrine and intra-church issues with no way out of the impasse, they seem to have lost sight of the Christian calling to be, as a community, the visible sign of the outpouring of God’s love for the world. This seems especially true as they come to deal with the more internally challenging questions of authority and gender issues. As churches struggle with existential issues of shrinking budgets and declining numbers of clergy there is a real danger that they will lose sight of their mission to be a community concerned with the great questions of human life – questions of justice, peace and of preservation of creation, along with religious and cultural achievements.

Therefore, I don’t believe that these two great movements of our age have to be set against each other. Rather the interfaith movement has the potential to breathe new life into the ecumenical movement and refocus it on mission. The interfaith movement challenges us as Christians to move beyond our internal discussions and parochial interests and to concern ourselves with the salvation of the whole world. The Jewish tradition calls this *Tikkun olam*, a phrase which means "repairing the world" or "perfecting the world."

Deepening spirituality

Cardinal Kasper, head of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, has suggested that the present ecumenical impasse is in fact an invitation to move into a deeper spirituality. This growing interest in spirituality is also a feature of the interfaith movement from which Christians have much to learn. One of the fruits of the ecumenical movement has been the reappearance of monastic and religious communities within the Protestant and Anglican churches. The appearance of many monasteries and places of prayer have also accompanied the movement of peoples of different religions to Australia. For example in the Catholic diocese of Broken Bay, which has the advantage of some lovely bushland, there are seven large Buddhist monasteries of monks and nuns as well as many other prayer centres. There is also a Christian monastery of Benedictine monks. It is an opportunity for new and deeper engagement at the spiritual level.

I have found personally, and others I know have had a similar experience, that interfaith engagement does not water down my faith to a wishy-washy ‘common denominator’ as some have warned. Rather, interfaith engagement has the opposite effect. It becomes a stimulus to re-examine, renew and deepen my appreciation of many things I have taken for granted in my own tradition and to reclaim them with new understanding. For example, in Jewish-Christian dialogue Christians have the opportunity to recover our understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus and insights into our own scriptures. Dialogue with Buddhists has led to renewed interest in Christian traditions of meditation.

In surprising ways contact with Islam has also led me to a new appreciation of the deepest mysteries of my Christian faith – especially, perhaps most unlikely of all, new insights into Christian belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity. The Islamic witness is first and foremost to a transcendent God, beyond any form of representation or imagery or containment in the material world. From this perspective it is, ultimately, a reminder to us all of the relative transience and insignificance of material things. As a consequence, this has led me to reflect more on the Christian belief that God, in Jesus, embraced human form and entered fully into the human condition. Jesus’s solidarity with us shows that God takes the world and human life seriously. Therefore, in Christianity, the material world, despite its ephemeral nature, is affirmed as the place of our salvation. I have come to see the Christian insight – one of taking seriously the human condition and all that it entails – as being complementary rather than contradictory to the Islamic one. Both have something important to teach us.

Muslims’ unwavering belief in the One God points us to the oneness of our humanity and things that unite us, while Christian belief in the Trinity acknowledges that diversity can be integral to unity. It reminds us that one of the ways that God’s unity finds expression is in and through the distinctiveness and otherness of persons in mutual relationship. Again it seems that Christians and Muslims have something to share with one another.

Of course this interfaith learning is not all one way. Other religions are also changing as a result of their modern encounter with Christianity. One example is the emergence of an “engaged” Buddhism in modern times. Whereas once Buddhists were known for detaching themselves from worldly concerns, and showing little interest in human development generally, Buddhists are now becoming far more involved in social activism. Buddhists have also shown interest in the person of Jesus, placing him within their understanding as a Buddha-like figure (Bodhisattva) who, having achieved enlightenment, out of compassion delays his departure from this suffering world in order to spend time teaching his followers.

Muslims in Western countries such as Australia, America, Britain and Canada I believe are also learning more about how to live an authentic religious life in a secular environment. In Australia Muslims may be learning from Catholic history in this country how to live productively as a religious minority. Although many Muslims in their countries of origin do not as yet have much experience of living either in a secular society or as a minority, contemporary Muslim scholars such as Tariq Ramadan are pointing ways forward. His books are widely read by progressive Muslims and others.

Recently, we have seen movement ecumenically towards a new emphasis on “Receptive Ecumenism” whereby churches are challenged to move away from the expectation that it is the other that has to change. Rather each church has a responsibility to ask not “What do other traditions need to learn from us?” but “What do we need to learn from others?” This approach can also be seen to be well underway in the interfaith movement.

Addressing gender issues

One area in which all religions are struggling to adapt is that of gender relations. I have been a part of some exciting developments in women’s participation in interfaith dialogue. Through interfaith dialogue among women, especially in such forums as the Women’s Interfaith Network (WIN) which consists of women from nine faith traditions and has about six groups meeting in Sydney, it has become apparent that women struggle against gender discrimination in all religions. In some interviews I did as part of my research into women in Islam and Christianity

Durrie (Muslim)* says:

It has been as much of a struggle (for women in Christianity) as it has been for women in all traditions. I haven’t yet heard any of verses from the Bible that you turn to in order to reaffirm the status of women, and that concerns me. And also it very much tied in with modern times. The movement towards parity for women in Western culture only occurred in the last century. It’s only in modern times that the status of women has improved for Christian women.....Rights for Christian women have only come as part of modern life, whereas Muslim women can look back to earlier times. With the separation of Church and state, I see that Western and secular culture has been more supportive of Christian women.....But modern times have been worse for women in Muslim countries.

Katherine (Catholic)* concurs:

What I’ve found most significant is that women’s treatment in other religious traditions parallels my own. One of the things I’ve learnt in dealing with Muslim women is that the Qur’an shows greater respect for women’s role in that it parallels duties for males and females and rights for males and females. It recognizes women’s rights in a way that Christian tradition doesn’t e.g. inheritance, divorce – even though this is not lived out in reality, it’s in the tradition. Negatively, I’ve learnt that in the Muslim tradition while many beautiful things are said about women’s role and women’s place and women’s equality, this is not lived out in practice.

Although much ecumenical progress has been made, issues of gender have largely been swept under the carpet in both the ecumenical and interfaith movements. The lack of progress when it comes to addressing women’s issues in religions generally, including

Christianity, continues to impact very strongly on women who remain in the churches today, and indeed indirectly on wider society.

As New Zealand scholar Janet Crawford has pointed out, from the time of BEM onwards (1980s) the two specific 'sticking points' in relation to the mutual recognition of ministries, namely the questions of authority and of gender, have received very different treatment in ecumenical dialogues. While questions of authority such as episcopal succession have been addressed and churches have been counselled to change their perspective for the sake of mutual recognition, on the issue of women's ministry this has not happened. In fact there has been no discussion allowed on the issue with little protest from church leadership. An important question to ask is whether, for the sake of its mission in the world, the ecumenical movement can afford to stagnate in this way.

The stalling around this issue is even more peculiar when one considers the "great leaps forward" which have occurred in addressing other important ecclesial issues. For instance, a Common Christological Declaration by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV of the Assyrian Church of the East in 1994 brought fresh hope to the ecumenical movement as it reconciled both churches under the ecumenical principle enunciated by Pope John XXIII at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, that differing doctrinal formulations need not be a barrier to full communion (see Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, 62). Anglicans and Lutherans have been able to move towards unity by locating the apostolicity of the community in its faithfulness to Christian life and witness as a whole.

It is more than 50 years since women in the WCC began insisting that women's place in the church is an ecclesiological question, having to do with the very nature of the church. A report by Sarah Chakko from the Syrian Orthodox Church on 'The Life and Work of Women in the Church' first raised the question at the first assembly of the WCC in 1948, with women insisting that the subject of women in the church should be the concern of the whole church and not seen as a problem of women alone.

To return to an interfaith perspective, the world religions of Christianity and Islam together make up 54% of the world's people. Since religions are among the most powerful ideological, sociopolitical and spiritual forces, they do play a crucial role in the organization and reinforcement of particular gender relationships. The transformation of religious attitudes and practices that contribute to the reinforcement of women's inferior status will need to be an integral part of this process.

There is a need for cultural change across all levels of society, if we want to reduce the prevalence of all types of violence against women. The leaders and members of world religions need to make their own contribution towards this.

Australia's role

I have caught a glimpse of the role that Australia is being called to play in ecumenical and interfaith relations in our region during the intergovernmental Interfaith Dialogues

for Peace and Harmony which the Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade helps to organize. I have been privileged to take part in four of these meetings held since September 11, 2001 - in Yogyakarta, Cebu (The Philippines), New Zealand and the latest in Cambodia. The governments of fourteen countries send 10 delegates to each of these. The Australian delegation has usually consisted of six Christians from different churches and four people from other faiths. As you would expect, the Christians are the ones who set the tone and drive the agenda of the Australian group. The fact that we have a long ecumenical history together is a significant factor. We have received consistent feedback from other countries about how much the Australian contribution is noticed and appreciated. Some things which have been commented on are our readiness to speak out on issues of justice and human rights, and the way we work cooperatively together. But perhaps the out-of-session activities are the ones which tell most about relationships. Early each morning we were the only country group to meet in the hotel pool for water netball. We had an Armenian archbishop, a Lutheran pastor, a Jewish leader, an Anglican bishop, a Uniting Church official and a Catholic nun, all splashing around in the pool together to the amazement of all who passed by. This is a striking image of how ecumenism and interfaith dialogue can interface!

Conclusion

In one of his latest books Timothy Radcliffe notes how all the Christian Churches have in recent years been making a big push to spread the gospel. Dioceses and congregations have drawn up ambitious plans to let people know about our faith. However, he also notes, that these have had little effect. He says “We talk about love, freedom, happiness and so on, but unless our Churches are seen really to be places in which people are free and courageous, then why should anyone believe us?”

“For example, anyone can say ‘God is love’. But it will not be a statement that makes any sense unless its context is a community that does, however badly and with endless failures, love. If we say that Jesus is raised from the dead but there is no sign of resurrection in our lives, then we can talk about the resurrection until Kingdom come, but our words will not mean anything....Unless we also labour to make the Church a place of evident freedom, courage, joy and hope..... unless people catch the whiff of freedom in our lives, then our words will actively subvert the preaching of the gospel.”

So good luck or bad luck – who knows? But to deepen our spirituality, address our unfreedoms and embrace the “other” – therein we find challenges today for both the ecumenical and the interfaith movements.

*names have been changed

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