

## ***One God of Many Names***

In the midst of the chaos and disasters of recent weeks, one good thing has been the way that local communities – people of faith or no faith, faith and civic leaders have come together to affirm the bonds that hold the community together – as has happened here in Oxford.

In the same way Christian Aid and Muslim Hands and many people of faith are working together to help those whose lives have been shattered here and in Syria and many parts of the world. They try to build bridges of reconciliation in areas of conflict, they campaign together to protect the environment.

One good example of such collaboration is the Parliamentors programme of the Three Faiths Forum, which, last Monday, marked its tenth anniversary. The programme brings together in groups of three undergraduates of different faiths to be mentored by a Member of Parliament and to do a project together. It was evident from those we spoke to that

for most of them it had been an amazing experience and that they had formed deep friendships. It had also been a good experience for the MPs to be reminded of the idealism of so many young people who want to make by their lives and work a much better world than we their parents and grandparents have achieved.

Interreligious dialogue is now also a significant concern of politicians and economists. Indeed religious leaders get invited to the Global Forum: but politicians tend to use religion as an antidote to terrorism or to soften their cuts to benefits. The danger is that interfaith is used just as an instrument and not seen as a call to a new perspective not only or religious and spiritual life but on our whole way of living.

Even in the interfaith movement there is a reluctance to accept this call. The present mantra seems to be 'Respect for the Other.' Obviously this is a good thing, but it evades the question of truth or more precisely whether traditions other than our own have spiritual treasures that can enrich our lives. For

example, if as a non-Muslim you read the Qur'an do you read it just to find out what Muslims believe or because you hope that it will enrich your spiritual life? I personally now read it or the Vedas or the Guru Granth Sahib in the same way as I read the Bible – hoping to hear God's word and to be brought closer to the Holy One.

On one occasion at a conference in Chicago, I was invited to stay by a Muslim cardiologist. When I was shown my room, there was a towel and a kettle, but also a prayer mat, which I was glad to use for my own prayers.

None of this, of course, is new to you as Unitarians or to this college which treasures the memory of Joseph Estlin Carpenter, who was a lecturer at Manchester New College, first at London and then at Oxford and who was principal here from 1906 to 1915. His knowledge of world religions was very extensive.

At that time the subject was called comparative religion – and critics said that this reduced religions to their lowest common denominator and that those

who studied it ended up 'comparatively religious.' But I like the response to the charge that this leads to relativism by the outstanding Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl's. He suggested that if you were playing scrabble the same letters can be used to make the word "relativize" or "revitalize."

And that revitalization is exactly what I hope interfaith can offer, although I prefer the word 'interspirituality,' which is now used by some American writers.

Evelyn Underhill who wrote much about mysticism said that 'religions meet, where religions take their source – in God.' Mystics of every tradition emphasise experience – the sense of being overwhelmed by the wonder and love of God. Think for example of Sri Ramakrishna. Indeed this is true of the founders of most world religions – think for example of Guru Nanak or Moses and the Burning Bush or Jesus as he came up from the river Jordan at his baptism and heard a voice saying 'You are my beloved Son.'

Mystics often say that this experience, like falling in love, cannot be fully expressed in words – although this has not stopped many of them from writing at length. Creeds, theological doctrines, even scriptures are in the Buddhist phrase ‘like fingers pointing at the moon.’ Indeed creeds should I think be read as poems of praise rather than the attempt to define what cannot be defined. The true meeting point is in the cave of the heart. The Alistair Hardy Trust which was for a time based at this college has done much to add to our understanding of religious and spiritual experience

This is why I am saddened by the now common contrast between religion and spirituality. I agree that too easily churches, synagogues and mosques take on a life of their own rather than being signposts to the Holy One: but spirituality detached from a tradition can become self-centred.

I have been helped to see this by what the distinguished Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossain Nasr said about the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi, who came to be known as the ‘The Most Grand Sheikh.’

Ibn 'Arabi speaks of the Universal Man or Word, who is a revelation of the Divine Names. For him, every prophet is an aspect of the Supreme Logos and is himself a 'word of God.' Ibn 'Arabi taught the unity of the inner contents of all religions. His approach did not mean one can by-pass the practices and beliefs of particular religious traditions, but that by penetrating to the heart of the outward rites and practices one discovers a spiritual unity that transcends them. This is why I have never felt a conflict between being an interfaith activist and a Christian priest. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b.1933) has said, 'Essentially the "burning of images" or the rejection of the external and formal aspects of a religion means that one must first possess these images and formal aspects. One cannot reject what one does not possess.'<sup>6</sup> Ibn 'Arabi spent much of his life praying the traditional prayers of a Muslim, repenting of his sins before God and invoking the Divine Name. He came to see that to have lived one religion fully is to have lived them all. It was at the heart of the revealed forms of religion that he found

the formless and the Universal, as he wrote in these beautiful words:

*My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,*

*And a temple for idols and the pilgrims' Ka'ba and the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Qur'an.*

*I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.<sup>7</sup>*

Jesus too said to the Woman of Samaria that 'the time is coming and now is that they who worship God will worship God in Spirit and in Truth.' Would that the day will soon come when those who worship at the Western Wall, in the El Aqsa mosque and in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre recognise that there is One God, whom they worship by different names.

It is this religion of love that provides the strongest motivation to go on struggling for peace, for seeking reconciliation with those who are seen as enemies,

for ensuring that immigrants are cared for and not left to drown, for protecting animals from cruelty and treasuring the beauty of the Earth.

‘Without vision, the people perish.’ If the faiths of the world fail to offer that vision, whatever practical good work they are doing, they are failing in their responsibility.

The abstract artist Naum Gabo was asked early in the Second World War why he continued with his abstract art - it seemed irrelevant, He replied to ‘keep alive the vision of our dreams that has been left behind.’ Each of us can help to keep alive that vision by following the religion of love.’

*A sermon preached to the Unitarian Chapel of Harris-Manchester College, Oxford by Revd Dr Marcus Braybrooke, who is Joint-President of the World Congress of Faiths, Co-Founder of the Three Faiths Forum and author of many books, including ‘Wider Visio’ and ‘Peace in our Hearts; peace in Our World.’*