

The Sir Sigmund Sternberg Lecture

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Inter-Religious Dialogue in a Globalised World

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The title of this lecture is rather all-embracing and rather ambitious and so I want to begin by setting out a few parameters. First of all a word about my own background and my own work which are obviously part of the context of what I have to say. I worked at The Vatican for eight years from 1985-1993. I was in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and working particularly in relations with Anglicans and Methodists. But, in that office, was housed the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and so I got to know well the secretaries of that Commission, first of all Monsignor, now Cardinal, Jorge Mejia, Monsignor Pierfrancesco Fumagalli and then Father Rémi Hoeckman.

Later, I was Parish Priest of English Martyrs Church, Sparkhill, a part of Birmingham with a very large Muslim population and I attended monthly meetings of a Christian-Muslim Group. When I became a bishop I became Chairman of the Catholic-Jewish Committee of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, as well as the Committee for Other Faiths, and now I am also Chairman of the Department for Dialogue and Unity which holds together our work in dialogue with other Christians, the Jews, other religions and the wider culture.

Naturally, I speak out of a Catholic experience and Catholic formation and it's out of that that I want to reflect on inter-faith relations today. It goes without saying that the world in which we live today is a completely new kind of situation, one which could not have been imagined or anticipated by previous generations. I taught social ethics between 1976 and 1985 - the time of the Cold War. The context in which we spoke of issues of war and peace in those days was totally different to our contemporary context, shaped as it was by the great East-West divide which was the context of a strong sense of danger because of the nuclear threat. Today we live with the aftermath of 9.11, the Iraq War, the London bombings, the constant rhetoric about global terrorism and the constant questions about how to understand and interpret it all. Is there a clash of civilisations, and if so, what is the religious dimension of it? We have a decline in Christianity in Europe, but a growth in Africa and Asia. There are now significant Muslim Communities in Europe with all the issues and, at times, tensions that that situation brings. And there is another factor which, I think, constitutes a significant change in our culture in this country. When I was a young priest we were often told that the problem we would encounter in our priestly work would be apathy. Now there is no shortage of religious apathy but there is, I think, in this country today, quite a strong strain of deep anti-religiosity of a kind that I don't remember when I was young. And I think it is fuelled in part by a conviction that religion breeds fanaticism, intolerance and violence. It's also fuelled, I think, by what is perceived as a deeply reactionary attitude on the part of many Christians and, indeed, members of other religions, to contemporary attitudes to issues of marriage and sexuality, as well as genetic issues and attitudes to abortion and euthanasia.

The debate about faith schools focuses this issue very well. Some say faith schools are necessarily reactionary or inherently divisive. But this is to fail to understand the absolutely fundamental place of faith in human life throughout history and throughout the world. Speaking as a Catholic, I know that in a Catholic school our children can acquire and develop the virtues and values necessary to make a real contribution to social cohesion: the recognition that all men and women are made in the image and likeness of God, that all life is created and deserves respect. These ideas issue from faith and can equip our young people to live in community and to contribute to the up-building of the human community. We are not isolated individuals and as people of faith we would be failing our youngsters if we failed to pass on our moral and spiritual heritage.

Of course, the British have a very singular attitude towards religion. It's not so commonly the hard line secularism of some parts of continental Europe. There is, I think, a particular kind of unease and embarrassment about religion that often manifests itself in mockery and ridicule. Now all that is part of the context in which we live and reflect on the whole question of interreligious relations, interreligious relations which I would argue are of fundamental importance for peace in the world and for social cohesion in our society. There can be no peace unless there is peace between religions. It follows that people need to be

religiously literate and informed if they are to contribute significantly and profoundly to the projects of social cohesion and world peace.

I want to look at this topic now from the vantage point of the Catholic Church's perspective on these issues and simply to suggest some lines of inquiry and reflection. The title of my lecture is: "Inter-Religious Dialogue in a Globalised World". It's good to bear in mind that the Catholic Church is the largest global organisation that there is. Although its presence obviously is much stronger in some places than in others, the Church is in most places and is present in countries that have large majorities of other religions. But what grounds and shapes the attitudes and the action of the Church in relation to other religions? It is, of course, the whole body of teaching, practice, and understanding that came out of the Second Vatican Council and has been developed since then especially in the deeds and words of Pope John Paul II. Now I know that this may be familiar to many of you and I don't intend to detail all the documents and developments of the last forty years. What I want to do rather is suggest or propose a general picture of the theological and cultural basis of the Church's relations to other religions and in that context I will also be speaking specifically about Catholic-Jewish relations which are a unique and particular issue within the broader spectrum of inter-faith relations generally.

Last year we marked the fortieth anniversary of several of the key documents of the Second Vatican Council that are relevant to our reflections today. We marked, of course, the anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on Relations with other Religions. Also, and very importantly, we marked the anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, the document on scripture which is of crucial importance for inter-religious dialogue and ecumenical dialogue. How exactly do Catholics understand the bible? This is critical especially on the one hand in relation to Protestant Christianity, but also in relation to Judaism and Islam. I want to focus for a moment, though, on another document, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. It's a unique document - a Council had never before produced a 'Pastoral Constitution' - and together with the Declaration on Religious Liberty it helped to create the climate in which subsequent developments would take place.

Basically, *Gaudium et Spes* put the Church in the position of taking a positive even a receptive attitude towards the modern world and towards modernity. It is precisely for this reason that some continue to be uneasy about it. It has been seen as naïve, not taking fully seriously the reality of sin in the world which the Church must counter with its preaching of the Gospel. Others have said that it is difficult to reconcile a document of this kind with the anti-modernist position that the Church has adopted over the last two hundred years. So the reception of *Gaudium et Spes* has been marked by a certain tension and that is part of a wider tension that characterises Catholic life today. Broadly speaking it is a tension between those who feel we've lost, we've sold out, and those who feel we're at a new departure point which we need to take further. The truth of the matter is, of course, more subtle. I certainly feel that the aftermath of the Council did involve something of a loss in terms of our liturgical heritage and the cohesion and rigour of our teaching. But it is equally clear, and I am thinking particularly of inter-faith relations here, that Vatican II set out the way the Church needed to go in obedience to the signs of the times and the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our day.

A key text of the Council seems to me to give crucial illumination on this matter. It's the beginning of *Lumen Gentium* - the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church - when it says that the Church is "the sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of unity with the whole human race". What that text is saying is that the Church is the focus of God's activity in the World. It is Catholic teaching that God's revelation in its fullness may be found in the Catholic Church. But that does not preclude recognition of God's actions in other Churches and the search for a deepening of communion between the Catholic Church and other Churches. Likewise there is a recognition that the saving action of the Holy Spirit can be a reality in the lives of members of other religions in a way known to God but difficult to articulate. But these developments brought with them a new agenda, new tasks and new challenges. And the word that focuses the nature of that challenge is the word "dialogue".

After the Second Vatican Council ended in the 1960's, two offices were set up in Rome to implement the provisions of the Council in relation to other Churches and in relation to people of other religions. Eventually these two departments came to be called the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and The Pontifical Council for Inter religious Dialogue. There was also another department which was originally called the Secretariat for non-Believers which eventually became The Pontifical Council for Culture. Recently, the present Pope has brought the Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Pontifical Council for Culture together. What these departments are all about is outreach and dialogue, in the spirit of *Gaudium*

et Spes. They are, of course, distinctive. The Council for Christian Unity seeks precisely to establish or rather restore unity among all Christians, both East and West. It is a huge challenge and undertaking. I was in St. Petersburg this year for the Orthodox Triduum and Easter and was struck by what a very different religious culture is theirs even though we affirm very close bonds of communion with them. When there is a break in communion, such as the East-West divide and the Reformation, different religious cultures develop and these differences are deepened and compounded making the work of reconciliation both difficult and daunting. But unity among Christians is, from a Christian perspective fundamental to the unity of the whole human community. We believe all humanity is called to unity in Jesus Christ. Moreover, some of the conflicts and divisions in the world are bound up with spiritual and cultural differences between Christians. We think of Northern Ireland, of the conflicts between the Orthodox Churches and Eastern Rite Catholics that have arisen in the Ukraine since the fall of the Berlin Wall. One can think of the conflicts between Catholics and Evangelical Christians in Latin America. We seek healing despite the difficulties. But the Spirit calls us to unity in faith, worship, and sacramental life, and that is part of the great project of bringing peace and justice to our world.

Another office that was set up to which I have already referred, and which is of particular importance in this context, is the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. This enterprise is different both from ecumenism and from inter-faith work, because relations between Christians and Jews is unique. They are unique and also vital to the quest for unity and peace in the human community. Christians have come to a new and deeper understanding of the Jewish roots of their religion. We now have a consciousness that we did not have before of the inextricable connectedness, spiritual, theological, cultural and historical between Christianity and Judaism. We are aware now of the fact that Christianity only gradually and over time emerged as a separate religion. We now recognise and celebrate the once-for-all covenant made by God with the Jewish People. We now acknowledge and respect the Jewish Religion's own autonomy and integrity as it has developed over the last two thousand years. And, in the light of that understanding, we repent of the sin of anti-Semitism that has been a stain on the consciences of Christians through the centuries.

What is the purpose of Christian-Jewish Dialogue? It is not to proselytise, but it should nonetheless involve proclaiming our faith fully and honestly. It has many dimensions. It must address theological issues that can be focused in words like Covenant and Messiah, but it is also and, again intrinsically, a dialogue that is about the conflicts and divisions that mar the world in which we live. Crucially it is connected with the continuing crisis in the Middle East and the conflict between the Israel and the Palestinians. I think it is generally agreed that peace between Israel and the Palestinians is basic to peace in that whole region. Not only that but the conflict in the Holy Land has implications for peace in the world. This is not the time for a detailed analysis of this issue but I would simply want to recall that the Holy See has recognised the State of Israel and continues to seek the full implementation of the Fundamental Agreement about the position of Christians in the Holy Land.

A final point in Christian- Jewish relations is that, although we do not have the language or the concepts to resolve the theological issues that face us, we are both eschatological religions, we look to God's actions in the future. We both read the texts from the Hebrew Scriptures that point us to the future where the lion will lie down with the lamb and where peace will cover the earth. We are people of hope.

These reflections inevitably bring us to the question of Christian-Muslim relations but I want to move on to some more general considerations first. First of all, a remark about the idea of dialogue itself. It is, I suggest, an idea that finds its roots and origins in the Jewish and the Christian traditions. It is an idea that has undergone, philosophical development in the western world. In his great encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI spoke of Christianity as essentially dialogical in nature. It is grounded in dialogue between God and man that finds its full expression in the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father. The spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* is one of dialogue and therefore of a spirit of openness to what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world as a whole

As Catholics, when we evangelise, when we preach, we are also receptive to what the Holy Spirit has been doing and is doing in the lives of those to whom we preach our message. I mention this to make the point that this key concept of dialogue, which is integral to Vatican II, may be quite alien to members of other religions. They may see it as an imposition of a Western way of thinking on them. Both Muslims and adherents to the great religions of the East could have questions about the rhetoric of dialogue. They might see questions of the unity of the human community in quite different terms.

Nonetheless I would submit that dialogue is a vital contribution that Christians have to make to inter-faith relations and peace in the world. Dialogue means respecting the other as other. When members of different religions come together in dialogue they do not water down their beliefs in order to find a lowest common denominator. When we come to the table of dialogue we bring the whole of our faith. Otherwise we come empty-handed. And if we bring our faith in all its fullness and integrity to the table of dialogue then we will discover shared perspectives, convergence of understanding as well as sympathy and mutual respect. As Christians we cannot but promote dialogue and seek a response- an attitude of dialogue in those to whom we reach out.

Relationships between Christianity and Islam are, as I have said, clearly of fundamental importance in the world of today, as indeed are relations between the three great monotheistic faiths. I am, of course, aware of the three faiths forum in that context. I am not qualified to speak in detail about Islamic-Jewish Relations but will say a word about an issue that arises out of the Catholic Church's commitment to dialogue and arises significantly in relation to Islam.

One of the problems in all dialogue relationships, including dialogue between Christians, is the question of who validates any agreements that are made and who is committed by agreements made. With the Catholic Church it is the Holy See that has the responsibility for assessing the extent to which, for example, an ecumenical agreed statement on the Eucharist that is made with the Anglicans corresponds with the faith of the Catholic Church.

Interreligious dialogue is quite different from Ecumenical dialogue because its purpose is not to find agreement of faith. Its purpose is more difficult to define, but it is certainly about finding greater mutual understanding and identifying shared values. But some similar issues arise. I think it would be true to say that no other religion has the kind of centralised authority that can ratify the findings of either ecumenical or interreligious dialogue in the way the Catholic Church has. I mention that at this point because clearly one of the key characteristics of Islam is that it has no central organisation. There is no one person or one body that is recognised by all Muslims as authorised to speak on their behalf. Again, they are certainly not alone in that. What this means in practice is that Christian-Muslim Dialogue will inevitably be with specific groups, organisations, or institutions. It is more difficult to envisage a dialogue with Islam as such.

But, a word about Christian-Muslim relations, and that word is heritage. We both regard ourselves as children of Abraham and the Second Vatican Council is actually quite strong in its affirmation about the common heritage of Christians and Muslims. Central to it all, of course, is the recognition by Muslims of Jesus as being a prophet. Important also are shared values in the area of family life. The point I would want to make in the context of this lecture is that in the world today, which many non-religious people would see as scarred by the conflict between Christian and Islamic Culture, it is vital that we be able to think in terms of shared values and beliefs, to focus on what unites rather than on what divides. This, I think, is especially important in this country where convictions about the dangerous and divisive nature of religion are common and widespread. To take this project further what is needed is as I have already intimated a culture of dialogue that is embraced by all people of faith and is a visible witness to people without faith.

Let me turn now to the religions of the East whose origins have no historical or cultural links with the Abrahamic religions I have been talking about. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Shinto and all the great traditions of the Far East. One of the key developments taking place in our time is the rapid economic and cultural expansion of China and of India, a fairly recent phenomenon but one which is set to change the economic and political configuration of our world. Japan has, of course, for a long time been a major economic power in the world.

The first thing to say is that the relationships and interaction between these religious traditions and those of the West must be of crucial importance. People are not purely political and economic beings. The unity of the human community cannot simply be a matter of politics and economics. We see this nearer home in the European Community. I was appalled at the resistance in some quarters to acknowledging the spiritual and religious heritage of Europe in the proposed European Constitution. And so also at the global level. We need to come together at the deepest level of our humanity - at the spiritual level.

Of course, dialogue with the Eastern Religions is different from dialogue between the three monotheistic faiths because we are not discerning or discovering or interpreting a shared history or common heritage. Nonetheless, important work has been done in dialogue not least in context of monasticism. There can be no doubt about the depth, the seriousness and the fruitfulness of dialogue between the religions of the East

and of the West. This is not the place, nor am I the person to go into detail about this dialogue. The only thing I would say is that the focus on the inner life that characterises this dialogue is a vital corrective to the frantic activism of the world in which people in the great cities of Europe and America, of India and China, live and work. We need to engage with the spiritual inheritance of all our fellow men and women if we are to avoid a world shaped purely by economic and political forces where the threat of conflict is always in the background.

So let me now come back to *Gaudium et Spes*, the charter for the Catholic Church's outreach to the world. What is certainly and self evidently the case is that it is a document of the modern world and inevitably shaped by the discovery of evolution and the scientific revolution. It is even a prophetic document in that what it has to say about the unity of the human community - about what we now call Globalisation - contains a vital and contemporary message.

In Jesus - God became Man; St. Athanasius said that, in a sense, God became all men. *Gaudium et Spes* is what we could call today an "inclusive document". It embraces the whole of human history and the whole of humanity. But it is quite clear that the central moment in human history is the incarnation of the Son of God. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in his baptism. Through the same Spirit, men and women can become Sons and Daughters of God. That is our faith, that is what we preach. It is a message for the world, but we preach it in a spirit of dialogue, openness and respect.- respect for workings of the Holy Spirit that lie outside our present categories of understanding. It is, I believe, a culture of dialogue that can enable us to see our own story and our own religion in its deepest and widest perspective.

A culture of dialogue requires and depends on a culture of religious freedom and I wish to pick up on that theme again as I bring my words to a close. The two things go hand in hand. I was very struck recently by an article by an American bishop in which he set out in detail the fundamental importance of religious freedom for dialogue and for peace in the world. In it he said:

"Today there is a growing recognition of the pluralism of religious belief. More and more people live shoulder to shoulder with others of different beliefs or no belief at all. Even in countries where one religion predominates, living in complete religious isolation is often no longer possible. Global communications sometimes make the world a virtual village. Increased immigration often makes people of diverse backgrounds neighbours. These new realities can move communities and nations in two very different directions: toward greater respect for others of differing religious belief or toward greater fear and intolerance. The challenge before humanity is to help build a global culture and practice that respect religious freedom as a guarantor of human dignity and a contributor to peace with justice."

I believe that dialogue is the path to peace with justice and that religious freedom is the prerequisite for making this possible. The bishop cites a number of examples of situations in the world where progress to peace is hampered by lack of religious freedom. Just as we must promote dialogue, we must insist on religious freedom and freedom of worship as the necessary context for dialogue to happen.

And finally, a quotation from Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* - "God is Love" - which puts the points I have been trying to make in their deepest theological, cultural and spiritual perspective:

"Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends. But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God. Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love (cf. 1Jn 4:8) and that God's presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love. He knows - to return to the questions raised earlier - that disdain for love is disdain for God and man alike; it is an attempt to do without God. Consequently, the best defence of God and man consists precisely in love."

Thank you.

Note on Sources

The documents of the Second Vatican Council are all found in Vatican II, The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, ed. Austin Flannery, OP, 1992.

The quotation from Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando, Florida, is contained in "Origins" of 30th March 2006.

The encyclical Deus Caritas Est is published by the CTS