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“RIGHTS, RELIGION and RESOLUTION”

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*Based on a paper delivered at The Second International Rights Conference on Conflict Resolution in Bilbao,
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It was during my term as a member of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which had been created as part of the Good Friday Peace Agreement, that I was elected President of the Methodist Church in Ireland. At my press conference, a political journalist asked, “Now that you are to be a Church Leader, can we assume that you will resign from the Human Rights Commission?” When I asked why he thought I should, he stated that, for him, there would now be a clear “conflict of interest.” I replied that the only conflict I could see would be in my diary!

In his thinking this journalist is not alone. For many people, human rights and religion do not sit easily together. For some, their understanding of human rights appears to be at variance with the teachings of their particular religious tradition in relation to personal responsibility.

Others have based their judgement upon what they see to be the highly destructive impact of flawed religious thought upon the understanding and practice of human rights around the world.

As we know, this can be attributed to any one of a number of factors, such as . . .

- A distorted, limited and subjective interpretation of Judeo-Christian texts and Islamic scriptures.
- Rigid religious fundamentalism
- A pre-occupation with an unhealthy individualism
- Censorious and unforgiving forms of pietism
- The conflicting interests of country, culture and creed
- Authoritarian structures and value systems as a means of protecting religious institutions.

Sadly, we do not have to look far into our respective histories for examples of some of the worst abuses of human rights which have been justified as deeds done “in the name of God”. For me, I look no further than the sad history of my own land of Ireland. In South Africa, apartheid was justified by the flawed theology of the Dutch Reformed Church. In the southern states of America, slavery was legitimised by a Fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. If space permitted, we could mention inquisitions, crusades and purges, with which most will be familiar.

Thankfully, there are other stories to be told. Recorded and unrecorded stories of the Gandhis, the Martin Luther Kings, the Mother Teresas and the Kagawas of this world, who refused to allow their deeply held faith-based understanding of justice and rights to be distorted by the context in which they found themselves.

As in the world of religion, so also in the secular world other abuses have often been defended as having been done “in the interests of the state”. We must be clear that no violation of Human Rights, whether “in the name of God” or “in the name of the state”- or in the name of both as in “For God and Ulster”- can ever be defended.

At best, all of this has led to many having a confused understanding of the contribution of religious thought and practice to any kind to peace-making. For others, it confirms their view of all religion as a negative and destructive force which has nothing positive to contribute to peace-making, justice and the protection of human rights.

Those of us who struggle for justice and peace from a spiritual/faith-based perspective need to understand and accept with sorrow and humility some of the reasons for these perceptions and the scepticism. We must also make clear that we do not consider ourselves to have a monopoly on the “things which make for peace”. At the same time, we must unapologetically re-claim our equal and rightful place within society as we engage with others in the search for a true peace in our world. If we are part of the problem, as can be rightly argued in a situation such as Northern Ireland, then we are also as well, if not better, placed than most to be part of the answer!

Rather than seeing an inevitable conflict between “religious” and “secular” interpretations of rights and the resolution of conflict, we must acknowledge and affirm our common and universally held values of rights and responsibilities, whether they be founded on ancient scripture and historic creed or drawn from a secular and humanist understanding of what it is that makes for a just society.

It will be by the mutual re-discovery and sharing of these common values that the religious world will be freed to be what it is called to be, yeast in the world. At the same time those with a secular approach will be enriched by an understanding of rights which goes well beyond the good ordering of society, important as that may be. Whatever the vocabulary of each, the discovery will be in the listening. Sadly, the words we use can so easily become barriers instead of bridges. So let us choose our words carefully!

So, whether we come from a faith-based or secular perspective, we need consensus on core principles and common values, whatever the vocabulary each of us use. Think back to the CND march to Aldermaston of Easter 1958, and the disparate “pilgrims” who walked side by side !

In Northern Ireland, where our conflict has long perceived to be “religious”, we are always careful in our use of language! However, coming from such diverse perspectives as we do, it has been in the discovery of shared principles and values expressed in a common vocabulary that we have been able to come to where we now are. I offer but a few examples of what I mean, amongst the many I could give.

1. “TALK”

This means a willingness to talk with whomsoever. What sounds like a simple self-evident first step in any process of conflict resolution is not a universally accepted principle, as is sadly illustrated in our world of global politics. To talk is construed by many as concession. As Methodists we soon discovered this within the Irish peace process when we were amongst the first to be open about our meetings with Republicans.

From a faith perspective, the WORD became flesh. God was in Christ in an un-conditional dialogue with his world. The Gospels are awash with stories of one who spent his life in unthinkable and unacceptable conversations! The fact is, whether in secular or biblical language, there can be no reconciliation without such engagement. To the surprise of many and against all expectation, out of such engagement emerges (usually quite unconsciously) a level of trust which enables people who are serious about the journey to take the next step. It is all about crossing the road, rather than the passing by on the other side.

2. “HONESTY”

For some the word is “TRUTH”. For others that opens up a debate about “what is truth?” Can truth be absolute? Whose truth etc? But what can be agreed is the need for HONESTY. Whether we call it “confession” or “acknowledgment” is less important than entering into a process whereby all parties to a conflict are enabled to move beyond denial of what we have all contributed to that conflict and of what we have done to one another. The acknowledgement of individual and collective responsibility for the causes and continuation of conflict by what we have failed to be, say and do - our sins of omission as well as of commission - is never easy.

- Honest dialogue involves painful confrontation as well as conciliation.
- It involves a willingness to make oneself vulnerable.
- It calls for listening as well as talking.
- It demands a willingness to return to the room as well as a readiness to walk out.

For us, it was through honest dialogue that people came to understand the alienation and anger of those who were denied their fundamental human rights on the basis of their creed or political aspiration.

It was in equally honest dialogue that we were able to speak of the most fundamental right of all, the right to life together with the unacceptability of violence as a means of achieving any political aspiration, however legitimate. To these we added the impossibility of re-unifying an unwilling people through murder and mayhem.

Honest dialogue enables us to walk in one another's shoes. At a public event in Belfast, I observed a highly-placed public official, whose own home had been bombed by the IRA, very obviously enjoying a conversation with a former leader of that organisation. When I commented upon this he replied, "Had I been born into the community from which he has come, and at the same moment of time, I have no doubt that I would have taken the same road as he". And the story could be told the other way around. Intuitively we know, whatever our perspective, that it is the truth that will make us free.

3. "PEACE" and "JUSTICE"

Thirty years ago, as Director of the Cory Community, I facilitated a weekend conference on the theme "When Peace breaks out". It was attended by a very diverse group of people. Amongst them were representatives of political groupings, radical would-be social reformers, community activists; people from various churches but most from none.

Surprisingly for many, and to the frustration of most, much of the time was spent in the search for a common understanding of "peace"! Eventually, agreement was found in the shared acceptance that there is much more to peace than the absence of violence.

Within the discussion, someone dared to "unpack" the great biblical word "**Shalom**". Shalom speaks of a peaceful society as a just society, within which there is a commitment to enshrine and protect the just rights of all. To those who were sceptical about religious thought as well as practice it was a revelation! But it was no less a revelation to many of those who naively thought they already possessed a monopoly on understanding the mind and will of God for his world!

Whatever our preferred word for PEACE, there can be no peace that does not embrace JUSTICE. At an ecumenical service in Belfast, Protestant participants were being introduced to the passing of the peace, many for the first time. As one lady took the hand of her neighbour she looked kindly into her eyes and said "peace". To which the Catholic lady replied, "...with justice"!

In our own context, where we are always more comfortable, those of us from a faith perspective will talk easily of diversity and of equal worth in terms of us all being made "in the image of God".

Sadly, this is not always easy to translate into our understanding of social and political realities. We live in an increasingly self-centred world where we have difficulty in accepting the legitimacy of the right of others to the rights we claim for ourselves. This means the rights of those with whom I disagree as well as those with whom I agree; those whom I see as "undeserving" as well as those I believe to be 'worthy'; those from other countries, cultures and creeds who "threaten" to invade my space and dilute my rights.

In Northern Ireland this can be the right to differing political ideologies and aspirations; the right to parity of esteem; the right to my identity; the right of perpetrator as well as victim and the right to justice for all.

To be a just society we must be an **inclusive** society. As we speak of moving on we must ensure that no individual or group will be left behind in terms of equal opportunity to health, education, housing and welfare. These are their rights. This is Shalom

4. "RISK"

I once heard F. W. de Clerk speak of his personal journey in the South African peace process. He spoke of the impact of international sanctions resulting in economic and political disaster for his people, as well as an inevitable and bloody civil war. It was clearly in the interests of survival rather than justice that he embarked on the journey which led to peace. However, he went on to tell us of the day when it became abundantly clear to him that what he was doing **was right in itself!** By taking the risk of doing the unthinkable, in the first instance for purely pragmatic reasons, de Clerk found himself and his nation on a new journey.

This is what biblical journeys were all about. Setting off without assurance or any idea where it may lead! So it was in the Irish peace process . . .

- Irish Republicans taking their seats in a Northern Ireland Assembly !
- The decommissioning of their weapons!
- Unionists sharing power with Republicans & former combatants ... and the list goes on !

But let there be no misunderstanding, journeys that involve risk can lead to crucifixion – in one form or another!

5. “COMPROMISE”

To many, if not most, this is a “bad” word suggesting weakness and/or surrender. Yet, as we know, not many of our marriages would have remained intact had we not learned the meaning of this word! Only recently did I discover that the root meaning of “compromise” is related to that for “accommodation”. “Accommodating” making space for one another...even those we thought we could never entertain!

On the 8th of May 2007 I sat in the gallery of our Parliament at Stormont in a privileged position beside the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Ireland. As I beheld the miracle of old enemies taking their oaths of office to share responsibility for the governance of Northern Ireland, I found myself humming (inwardly) familiar lines from Charles Wesley’s timeless hymn on the Incarnation, “...widest extremes to join that we the life of God might know.”

That day was entirely about people making space for one another.

6. “GENEROSITY”

Generosity towards long-standing enemies and those we see as more responsible than others for our conflict was never going to be easy. When we were engaged in difficult conversations about the proposed early release of politically-motivated prisoners, it was a South African lawyer (Brian Curren) who said, “Don’t speak of this as justice. This is not about justice. You cannot speak of this as justice to a widow or a fatherless child. But it is about giving all parties to the conflict an equal opportunity to share in a new beginning, whether you believe them to be deserving of this or not.” “This”, said I, “is what we as preachers call ‘Grace’”! Whereupon he replied, “If this is your word, use it often, for you will need a great deal of it “

“Generosity”....“Grace” whichever word is familiar to us, they both speak of an alternative to the understandable but destructive response to what we perceive to have been inflicted upon “us” and “our” people. Astonishingly, it has been many of the victims themselves who have helped us in our understanding of such words.

If space permitted, we could go on to “translate” other great theological and biblical concepts and words into “non-preachy” language. Words such as “HOPE”. It was a Palestinian political leader who echoed the biblical Zechariah who spoke of “prisoners of hope” when he declared, “we suffer from an incurable condition called hope”.

But in all my debates and discussions, one word for which I can find no adequate alternative is **FORGIVENESS**. Search your Thesaurus! I can only conclude that this is not only a distinctive word but a distinctive possibility entrusted to us to share with an otherwise largely cynical and vindictive world. So, I have stopped searching! I do not want to apologise for or disguise something on one hand so difficult, on the other so central to my faith. In Northern Ireland, where we are now seriously asking how we can deal with our painful past, the real challenge, as distinct from the academic, is how to translate this astonishing word in a way that will be understood by those of us who profess faith as much as by those who declare none.

There is little doubt that for this word, as for others, the translation will be in who we are more than in what we say. Words that have not been “made flesh” have little meaning in a biblically illiterate world!

Prayer

Our Father, God of peace and justice, you offer us the unlimited resources of your grace. Only in that way shall we see manifestations of your Kingdom in our relationship whether personal, communal or international. We thank you for all that has been achieved in Northern Ireland. We hope and pray for more progress towards a compassionate and safe society where all are valued and children can grow up without fear and free from prejudice. “Let there be peace, beginning with me”. **Amen.**

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Dear Friends,

Alan Litherland who was 94 in June still reads the minutes and reports we send very carefully so he knew that we have been concerned about the future viability of P21C. He therefore offered to write the message below. One problem is we lose people who move house but don't send us a new address. We can't do anything about those who have gone to where there is unbroken peace and therefore we need to recruit new readers. If you can use more than one copy please contact me. The project is expensive. There is a budget to be met for printing and postage and occasionally for an article or we might make a donation to a peace project in which the writer is involved. Even though we save on emails, more than 1400 still go by post.

May I recommend two books? The one is, **"We Will Not Fight" - The Untold Story of World War One's Conscientious Objectors**, by Will Ellsworth-Jones. This centres on one Conscientious Objector, a Methodist from Conisbrough, near Doncaster. His family though supporting him took different positions. Bert Brocklesby however stuck to his position and survived to see COs accepted after having his court-martial sentence to be shot commuted. The other is a voice from the past. **"After War, is Faith Possible?"** gives us a new anthology of Studdert-Kennedy with biographical introduction. His writings suddenly seem marvelously contemporary. Every Local Preacher and Minister will benefit from reading this but will be challenged if they have become satisfied with platitudes and ill-digested theology. G. S-K faces problem of evil squarely and deals with the nature of God and the Atonement rejecting some of the traditional interpretations as unworthy of God. You might order them from the Library so that they are widely read.

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A Message from Dr. Alan Litherland.

I am concerned about the future of Peace in the 21st Century. Recently, the monies coming in have not been sufficient to cover the costs, so I am making this rather special appeal to your generosity. Perhaps I should begin with an apology for collapsing so suddenly at the end of 2005, leaving the distribution of P21C in limbo - though of course it was outside my control! I still have no recollection of the first few months of 2006. I must therefore express my gratitude and appreciation for the way the good folk at MPF have managed to pick up the pieces and get P21C going again, with a selection of different authors.

So I am inviting you to contribute, if you have not done so recently, by sending a cheque using the form below. Please write P21C on the back.

Having launched P21C in January 2000 I naturally have a proprietorial interest in seeing it continue.

Yours sincerely

Alan Litherland.

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RESPONSE FORM To: John Young, Shalfleet, Dunston Heath, Stafford, ST18 9AN

I enclose £..... as a contribution towards the costs of "Peace in the 21st Century". [Cheques payable to the Methodist Peace Fellowship, please. If you would like a receipt, please tick here.....]

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