FAITH AND WORSHIP

HORIZON AND FOREGROUND REVISITED: AN IRISH VIEW

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A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

I remember once attending a Theological Conference in Tirana, Albania. My flight arrived very early on Sunday. There was no Anglican Chaplaincy that I could find. I still wanted to worship God on Sunday. I found a Greek Orthodox Church. I went in. I stood for a time among worshippers in what was a very beautiful and confident modern building with all the features of Orthodox worship happening around me. I prayed in my own tradition alongside others of a different tradition. I felt that I detracted nothing from the primary act of worship which was in the Orthodox tradition and which was being offered for others. I was technically uncomprehending. I had neither the language nor the grasp of Orthodox ritual critically to engage as an insider. But it felt better to be there than not to be there.

I made my way along a main street to the edge of the city’s square and found a Mosque. There I asked if I might sit inside and pray in my own tradition. Their only stipulation was that I remove my shoes which I duly did. I sat there for roughly the same amount of time as I had stood in the Greek Orthodox Church. I was once again uncomprehending. In neither context did I feel rejected or alienated, although I was properly an outsider physically on the inside who remained religiously on the outside in each instance. It was a different exclusion, nonetheless. In the first case, I was not in communion; in the second case, I was of an entirely different, though related, Abrahamic World Faith.

Incidentally, both experiences were particularly interesting and powerful, for a quite different reason. During the atheistic political and social regime of Enver Hoxha in Albania, all religion was proscribed. The Islamic Mosque, however, survived because, as a building with totally aniconic decoration and symbolism, it was deemed cultural and not religious. This meant that it alone carried the continuity of Faith expression in a way that no other religious buildings in Albania were readily permitted to do. (This explains, for example, the brand-newness of the Greek Orthodox Church which I had also visited.) The Mosque made a statement about the voice of Faith at the court of atheism and for that reason was a beacon of hope for any and all of Faith during that regime. Islam probably unwittingly carried the torch of faith visibly for others who cannot do so. The other thing is that, coming as I did from a majority post-Christian country like Ireland, where there is still a fuzzy and a faded narrative of fully functioning Christianity in the ether (a different combination of alienation and incomprehension), I was a minoritarian in each of the religious contexts and gatherings I attended in Tirana. That too was an important corrective to my assumptions of being a fully functioning religious person.

THE NATIONAL DAY OF COMMEMORATION

I take you to an entirely different event, an annual occasion, held in times past in The Royal Hospital Kilmainham and now regularly in Collins Barracks in Dublin (because of repairs and refurbishment work it was held this year in Collins Barracks in Cork). It is also replicated in towns and cities across the twenty-six counties as locally appropriate on what is usually the second Sunday in July. It is The National Day of Commemoration. It is attended by representative service personnel from across thirty-two counties in Ireland. It honours the contributions made by Irishmen and Irishwomen in war and in peace. This is no easy feat in our politically divided and politically contested island of Ireland, with its hinterland of religious intolerance. It is a highly sensitive occasion. It represents a tour de force on the part of The Department of an Taoiseach, in terms of tact and attention to detail. First, it draws together war and peace. It recognizes that both are inalienable aspects of our world, in historical and in contemporary times. War and peace bring their tragedies and brutalities and their miracles of intervention and survival. They are replete with human stories where religion is both a motivator and an irrelevance. Secondly, it holds together Christian traditions where one such tradition is publicly on record as not being able in religious conscience to participate in Inter Faith worship and yet a means has been found to incorporate this representative denomination. Thirdly, it does its utmost to do something which very few regular church people seem to understand. That is to respect the anterior and distinct place of Judaism in religious understanding without any supersessionism of Judaism by Christianity. Fourthly, it gives voice to the Scriptures of a broad spectrum of contemporary Irish religions in languages such as Irish, English, Hebrew, Arabic, Pali and Hindi ahead of the voicing of the sentiment of the religious texts and their content in an English translation. Fifthly, at the conclusion of the overtly religious contributions, there is a contribution from The Humanists.

Any critical observer may rightly say that nobody gets exactly what he or she wants. It is, nevertheless, a considerable achievement that all traditions get something substantial and significant and public for what they have to offer to the whole of Ireland in the cause of honouring those who have given their lives in the service of the freedom of their own or of others’ nations. War memories need long and slow redemption. I suggest that the event is a success because it is a governmental, a civic and a secular initiative. Were any religious grouping to organize it, instead, then it would be a great deal more problematic and contentious. And another helpful consideration is that it is held in a neutral place that has nothing to do with religion.

AIRPORT MULTI-FAITH SPACE WHICH IS SELF-REGULATING

While Covid-19 has erased the memory of international travel for many people, some of us may remember seeing, often in a prominent place or at a significant intersection in an airport terminal, a sign saying: Prayer Room. Such travel is fast returning to pre-Covid levels These rooms differ in design and in sophistication. They also differ in effectiveness. But my point is not to do with their success or their failure. It is to do with the honesty of the attempt to offer a space of integrity that those of any Faith, of no expressed faith or of no faith whatsoever, may use for prayer or for quiet – again in a totally secular milieu. The specific context is that of international travel. Such travel brings its own high emotion and intense stress, its need for quiet and for the connection and the belonging with God that prayer gives to those who are faithful and fearful. I avail of such Prayer Rooms if I am travelling and if I have the time between connections. I do so for a number of reasons.

The first is that if they are not used, they will close; space is at a premium in an airport, as in any other commercial enterprise. If footfall keeps something open, then it is open not only for the occasional traveller but for the staff for whom the airport terminal is their home during the day and the night, depending on computerized shifts for work rostering. They too need the access to God. The second is that I can readily pray in my own tradition in such a space while another person prays in his or her own tradition alongside me without any invasion of spiritual space by either party. Whatever authorization for use such spaces have from the various Faith Traditions, they are usually sparse in terms of iconography and are as extensive in terms of information about, and for use within, the participating traditions as each tradition makes available. Some have separated spaces for each tradition with not only symbols but artefacts representing such traditions. Some have one room and all users have to respect one another’s diversities openly and publicly. Some make specific provision for lustration by the adherents of a particular World Faith before prayer. These spaces are maintained on a daily basis by the airport authority and by its staff, not by the different Faith traditions. I suggest, once again, that this objectivity of provision is a key to their workability. On a daily basis, they are, nonetheless, entirely dependent on the goodwill of users to leave the space provided in a suitable state of cleanliness and tidiness for any users who come after them once they have finished praying. This is an important etiquette expected of such users. For my own part, I see no reason why such provision cannot be extended to shopping centres and leisure and health clubs, along with other workplaces, where people spend a great deal of their quality time today. People can and do have spiritual thoughts and needs anywhere and at any time. They may really benefit from a defined and designated quiet space in which they can pray or meditate or reflect.

A REIN CHECK FOR US ALL

I have spoken immediately above of places where people spend quality time. During the time of Covid-19, we who are Christian and who were accustomed to ‘church’ happening, whether we ourselves were present or not, got the message that, for Public Health reasons, churches were closed for conventional use. It was not safe to go there or to be there, was the advice. Where, then, was God to be found? The answer surely is this: where God is always to be found – in the totality of the creation. While we rightly should be proud of how we managed during this time, let us for a moment think of Faiths Other than our own. Muslims had, throughout their history, been accustomed to praying shoulder to shoulder five times daily and could no longer gather in proximity. Buddhists were instantly unable to conduct Refuge, a rite of initiation, because people could not gather in sufficient numbers to witness in the small spaces that they often have, as a minority Faith, as places of worship. Jewish people were not able to conduct funerals as the numbers who might gather were restricted to below the minimum of adult males (ten in number) needed for a funeral validly conducted. Religion at this time became domesticated; families and individuals found themselves worshipping ‘on-line’ or conducting domestic liturgy from within family resources. Not only had this limitations, it also has unexpected and untold consequences.

Churches which have become top-heavy in the area of liturgical and ritual leadership from clergy and clericalized lay people found themselves with an ever-increasing zapping of energy and resources, and indeed capacity, in delivering worship into the home when, in other parts of their lives, people were doing everything from home at the very same time. For the vast majority of adherents, religion consists in gathering with others. And yet, in the midst of significant tensions and frustrations, churches kept going and kept afloat. They kept meeting spiritual needs. For this everyone involved is to be applauded. The daily demands were ratcheting up all the time and were paramount. Take for example a church-going family where father and mother were both working from home. They were also probably home-schooling their children and perhaps also caring for more aged relatives – and everyone, living in such close proximity, was trying to avoid contracting Covid-19. The time of the global pandemic brought a change in spiritual life. Not only did we lose the power of repetition which will yet prove expensive in embedding habits of religious practice. We also released people into addressing their own spiritual needs directly with God and independent of the traditional mediation of the church.

FROM STATE TO CHURCH

I began with a personal reminiscence of looking for a place in which to worship when I was abroad. I was in a city where there was no readily accessible church in my own tradition in which to do so. I described how I was able, without any impediment, to avail of space that was sacred in two traditions different from my own tradition. I was able also, perforce in a limited way, to worship God consonant with the way I had come to know God in and through my life of Christian discipleship without contradiction. This was not a complete experience by virtue of my being an outsider to both traditions concerned and by virtue of my not gathering as such. But it was a Godly experience.

For me this raises the question of whether there are real ways in which churches and other worship spaces in the Christian tradition can be invitational, indeed missional in the sense of being present in the world as the Son of God was sent into the world by the Father to be present in the Incarnation. Can they be present and accessible to those of other traditions, should members of such traditions wish to come and worship either alongside Christians or worship in their own way in a building dedicated to the worship of Almighty God? This is a hard question. This is a dangerous question. For some traditions, the question itself is anathema. In a pluralist Ireland it needs to be asked. It asks in a fundamental way and in a specific context the question: Can there be a welcome of a stranger? It also asks it specifically of the Church of Ireland and the Anglican tradition. I showed also above how the secular state in Ireland can and does readily offer space and scope for shared worship to Faith traditions acting in parallel respectfully and differently. The limitation contained in a negative response by the Church of Ireland, if such it were to be, is not necessarily one of truculence or of rejection of the religious intentions of those who are other than Christian. The limitation may properly be occasioned by a genuine sense of appropriateness as understood by those who are the custodians of a denominational Christian inheritance and implementation locally as shaped by past history and as alive in the present day.

The question is not going to go away. We in the Church of Ireland need at least to be willing to have the discussion both internally and with those of other Faith traditions. There is no point talking about ‘them’ without talking with ‘them.’ The question at its boldest is this: Are we able to discern validity in the religious self-understanding and spiritual expression of those who are members of other Faith traditions while we continue to hold and present a religious self-understanding of ourselves which is radically distinct but is also an understanding of oneself as a person of faith in some sort of recognizable sense that is shared with other persons of faith?

This is not multi-culturalism, nor again is it multi-faith. It is a challenge to exclusivism. It is the approach road to the dialogue of life and the dialogue of ideas that are essential to Inter Faith engagement. Eating with those of Faith traditions other than Christianity is a religious act in many of those traditions. So is hospitality towards the stranger in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions. The declaration by God to Peter in Acts chapter 11 that all foods are clean does not mean that eating food with others does not carry a religious meaning or a religious importance. Acts 11.9: *A voice from heaven came a second time: “It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean*.” opens the way to a radical breadth in understanding the distinction between profane and clean. It is not only about the food after all. It is about the human engagement and the personal vulnerability of mutual hospitality. I, like many others, will have been invited to Open Iftar at the end of one or more of the days of Eid or Ramadan. This I have always viewed as an outreach in generosity from within one Faith tradition to someone in another Faith tradition. And it is offered graciously with a religious intent.

CATHEDRALS

Cathedrals may just be a little bit different. Cathedrals are able to undertake Inter Faith events, whether it be lectures, discussions, exhibitions, cultural events or hospitality if they decide to do so. I suggest this primarily from an episcopal perspective, which is my own perspective, because of the teaching and learning role of the bishop in the diocese and in the community of the cathedral. Such teaching and learning require the interpretation of what is happening outside as well as inside the church of today. Cathedral communities form every time people gather intentionally in that particular sacred space. Confining bishops to the church of denomination is not what episcopacy is about. It could, and rightly, be suggested also from a decanal perspective in regard to sanctuary and the development of a ministry of outreach by the dean and those who work with him or her. And again, it could be suggested from a public space perspective on the part of the Cathedral Chapter or Board. There is a multi-faceted argument for expression of faith generosity as mission. What do I mean by expression? I mean taking the opportunity to show and share the generosity of the Christian tradition in terms of its not being threatened by Otherness. Instead, it can show itself as being open to engagement with Others in the area of teaching and learning. It also enables the cathedral to show publicly that its role is not one of conversionism but one of invitationalism.

The argument from teaching and learning runs as follows. Discipleship of Jesus Christ is the lifeblood of Christianity. Discipleship is not polishing up one’s own religious purity but being regularly in the presence of Jesus Christ and being sent into an unknowing world to bring Jesus Christ there. We instinctively think of twelve male disciples following Jesus everywhere and becoming a religious elite. But let us think differently and, for a moment, think of those who were healed in any way by Jesus. They went off to tell both their own tale and the tale of the one who had healed them. They became disciples engaged in mission. The classic example is the Samaritan woman in St John 4 who said to her townsfolk: *Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?* (St John 4.30)

Such commissioning forms a significant part of the bishop’s role. It connects with authorization in the life of the church. In the contemporary church, and by ancient tradition, the *cathedra* is the seat of teaching and learning. It gives the cathedral its name. It is occupied by the bishop alone. Some bishops teach by erudition, some teach by prophecy, some teach by a simplicity that gives all the signs of being less erudite than the intellectual attainments of the people whom they teach. The teaching, nonetheless, is intrinsic to the office and is authoritative. This type of leadership is not about cleverness or competition. It is about contribution to the self-understanding and the empowerment of others in Christ’s name for being equipped to live their own lives to the glory of God and for the service of God’s people in the world of God’s creation. A part of this is the bishop letting go, sharing out *to* and *with* others who can do it more effectively than the bishop can what the bishop discerns as needing to be done. In this way, there is a devolved role of teaching and learning within the role of episcopal oversight and shared discipleship. It is collaborative discipleship and ministry in new places of engagement.

It is within the equipping of God’s people for dialogue that the bishop’s teaching role can find a voice. His or her encouragement of dialogue is strategic if it is to happen. It is part of the permission-giving ministry of the bishop. Equipping for dialogue first and foremost relates to the dialogue of life along with the dialogue of ideas. It is not an elitist activity. It is the equipping of people for sharing the Good News of God’s presence and salvation to those who have ears to hear. It happens both inside and outside churches. It is worship in action. It is public liturgy leitourgia. It is not for the Christian dialogue partner to force a response or a reaction or a conversion on the person who is Other. It is for the Christian dialogue partner to give a living account of why Jesus Christ matters in the shared activity of earthly living and why it is appealing and compelling. It is also for the Christian dialogue partner to offer a witness of how motivation in the person of Jesus Christ and the person of the Holy Spirit is, in itself, worship. Such worship is to be found in the interchange of dialogue relating to whatever are the shared areas of concern and celebration that occasion and facilitate the dialogue as it unfolds. Dialogue stimulates dialogue.

THE FIVE MARKS OF MISSION OF THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

The Five Marks of Mission, having fallen out of vogue in many parts of the Anglican Communion for quite some time, have made a significant resurgence in both living discipleship and policy making. The Lambeth Conference 2022 has helped to put them back on the map. The Diocese of Dublin and Glendalough engaged in extensive application of The Five Marks in its life and self-understanding as a community of faith and discipleship from 2014 to 2019. Inter Faith work is part of the role of the bishop in being a leader in mission. The Five Marks themselves define mission as expressed in The Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion. They have been abbreviated as follows:

Tell: to proclaim God’s Kingdom

Teach: to teach, baptize and nurture

Tend: to respond to human need

Transform: to transform unjust structures

Treasure: to safeguard creation.

If this is described as the mission of the church, it is also a cross-over point with those of Other Faiths. The last three missional priorities are common to all humanity and the first two are specific to Christianity. Other Faiths have their story of God to tell and to teach, their own versions of Marks one and two. The wider shared mission is a mission of humanity in the world of creation, care, justice, ecology and the environment. This is the missional energy within Inter Faith dialogue. It can be consonant with being a fully functioning disciple of Jesus Christ living in a pluralist and a secular world today. It is a world inhabited by people of countless other Faiths seeking to do something similar.

WORSHIP OR NO WORSHIP?

A guiding principle of authorized worship in the Christian tradition is: *lex orandi lex credendi.* Roughly translated, it means: you will find our doctrine in our worship or: how we pray reflects how we believe. It derives from Prosper of Aquitaine who says in Book 8 of his writings: ‘Let us consider the sacraments of priestly prayers, which having been handed down by the apostles are celebrated uniformly throughout the whole world and in every catholic church so that the law of praying might establish the law of believing.’ The essential component is that this adage states clearly that liturgy is not distinct from theology. Furthermore, it has been a guiding principle in developing early Creeds and The Canon of Scripture. Another component is that because we express our beliefs, not simply our aspirations, in our worship, this combination has an authority in and of itself. For Anglicans, the great expression of this is in The Book of Common Prayer as crafted by Thomas Cranmer. Its architecture combines worship and doctrine in the presentation and arrangement of prayers and exhortations and in the selection and arrangement of Readings from Scripture. Of course, Cranmer is writing to a particular theological template which has changed in many of its parts over time. However, the principle remains that what you say in prayer is what you hold as doctrine. To *lex orandi lex credendi* we can rightly add *lex vivendi*: The rule of thumb by which we live our lives. It is here that future Faith encounter most obviously fits.

While many may feel intense frustration at the current status quo, not least those who are members of Inter Faith families who want to worship together, the position above holds officially and has its own logic. In the public acts of worship, many may feel that no Faith tradition gets anything significant on the day, but at least every Faith tradition gets something. While many equally may feel that there is an increasingly tired statement in Faith traditions standing alongside one another in stilted worship that is effectively separated, it still has its good points. The first is that the Faith traditions are alongside one another and in the one place together. The second is that God, as defined by each differently, is being addressed and honoured and invoked. The third is that the language of ‘infidel’ is no longer being used and there is respect for difference along with the recognition that culture and faith work together. Where there is not agreement is that in invoking God, the different Faith traditions are addressing the same entity. Such a recognition means that there is a great deal of new theological work that needs to be done and approved as widely as possible before the question of Inter Faith worship as integrated Inter Faith worship is going to be more than a theoretical one. We remain at the point of a range of Faiths illustrating a succession of themes from within the integrity of their own tradition. The Baha’i Faith tradition is one exception in embracing Faiths other than itself in a very specifically positive way.

In many ways, I should like to suggest, worship is not the place to start. Ignorance and respect meet over the table of information. Scriptural Reasoning can play its part in this because it takes the exponent and the interpreter of any religious text beyond the horizons of the use of that text on the inside of its tradition of origin and lets it ventilate in the perspective of Other Faiths with confidence. Scriptural Reasoning also enables Faith traditions to receive authoritative criticism from others. This is the long journey that needs to be begun and continued if we are to express and to understand the truth claims of a range of traditions who will always need to work again and again towards understanding and accommodation.

A PRINCIPLE FROM AN ECUMENICAL GATHERING

I remember on another occasion participating in a large-scale ecumenical residential event in Rome. As part of one of the plenary sessions, the question arose about inter communion. It was hotly debated, with persuasive opinions on a number of sides. It was the ecumenical togetherness in all other aspects of our conference that began to force this issue. The eucharist was, of course, going to be celebrated in the Roman Catholic tradition. A wise German Lutheran bishop rose to his feet and simply said: While you feast, we will fast. This was accepted as a working model. Those of us who were not members of the Roman Catholic tradition attended the eucharist, did not receive Holy Communion and yet felt part of its fulness. My friend, who was an Irish Roman Catholic priest, sat with me and, when other members of his tradition went forward to receive Holy Communion, he continued to sit with me. The solidarity of friendship, expressed through a self-denying ordinance, transcended institutional boundaries and denominational entitlement. The banquet continued for all concerned and some fasted, even from among those of the feasting tradition, while others feasted.

So, I am back to my Sunday morning in Tirana in Albania. Was my time in both religious buildings a waste of my time, or even worse a waste of God’s time? Did I fail in terms of my own Christian belief system? Did I fail within the limits of both ecumenism and Inter Faith engagement by accepting that I was a welcomed unknown outsider who did not participate? I do not think so, but I would like to hear your opinion. There is a third component in the Anglican tradition to add to *lex credendi* and *lex orandi.* It is *lex vivendi* which means the law of the way you live your life. In an Inter Faith context, in a multi-cultural world where people of good will want to contribute each and all to the common good, *lex vivendi* is an important way of living out the prayer and the belief of our Christian tradition in the service of all. It connects with another Latin adage: *laborare est orare* which might be translated: working is praying or going about your daily work is in itself a living and a loving payer.

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