

Building Interfaith Understanding

Quaker testimonies in an age of diversity

Eleanor Nesbitt

(eleanor.nesbitt@warwick.ac.uk)

9 October 2008

'Challenges for our Times' (lecture 2), Jordans

9 October: reminders of historic encounters

- 258 CE St Denis (who had angered Pagan priests) was beheaded on Montmartre
- 1003 Leif Erikson – first European to land in North America – reached Newfoundland
- Saint's day for Louis Bertrand, Spaniard who converted indigenous people of central America

NB In 2008 it is Dassehra, when many Hindus recall Lord Rama's defeat of Ravana

It is also National Poetry Day!

'Faith' and 'religion': some usages

- Faith = confidence, trust, optimism
faith community
religion, 'world faith', system of belief
- Religion = theology, truth claims especially re 'God'
source of solace, insight, inspiration,
vision, spirituality
community – people with history,
norms, rituals, stereotypes

Understanding faiths/religions means

(a) understanding teachings/ ideas and

(b) understanding communities

Religion as identity

- Identification with what we were **born into**
- Identification with what we have **chosen**

(Phillip Hammond's 'primary' and 'secondary' identification)

Building interfaith understanding

- Understanding – standing below (humility); rapport; negotiated settlement
- Building involves: intention, design, expertise, materials, labour, teamwork, ongoing need for vigilance and repair
- Interfaith understanding =
 1. Understanding OF different faiths (ideas/communities)
 2. Understanding BETWEEN people of different faith communities
 3. **On a basis of (a) inter-faith co-operation and (b) of insights from different faiths – understanding that equips us all to meet our shared challenges**

Understanding of 'culture'

Understanding of faith communities means need to understand significance of:

- generation
- gender
- relative education and wealth

shared **values** – but which is prioritised?

shared **language** - but what underlies and shapes usage?

Globalisation and change

- * Unprecedented pace and scale of interpenetration of the local and the global
- * Secularisation, consumerism, apathy to religion together with
- * Appeal of 'spirituality'
- * Diversity and liberalism together with 'fundamentalism' and radicalisation
- * Changing media – effect on allegiance and religious authority

Diversity/plurality

- ‘traditional plurality’: the jigsaw society made up of Christian, Hindu etc communities
- ‘modern plurality’: the jigsaw individual influenced by multiple contacts etc
- Interfaith understanding involves jigsaw individuals
- Need to recognise the diversity (divisions, processes of change) within ‘faith communities’

Challenges

1) Specifically faith-related:

- Competing/exclusive truth claims
How do liberals relate to absolutists?
- Change – its pace and diversity and the rising profile of Islam in Europe
- Tensions between and within ‘communities’

2) Current global issues: climate, poverty etc

Secular responses

For example:

The challenges posed by diversity are giving rise to initiatives by secular society nationally and internationally

- UK government and ‘social cohesion’
- Blair Foundation
- Initiatives by EU, UNESCO etc

as well as by faith-based organisations

A Quaker contribution? Tradition and testimonies

- Tradition: non-exclusive, experimental
silence
spirituality and service
engagement with other faiths
- Testimonies – ongoing, evolving witness –

TRUTH, PEACE, EQUALITY, SIMPLICITY,
ENVIRONMENT

Testimonies

TRUTH, PEACE, EQUALITY, SIMPLICITY, ENVIRONMENT

- **resonating with faiths' insights and teachings** e.g. Guru Nanak
'Highest is Truth: higher still is truthful living.'
See Morgan and Lawton 2007 *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions* (EUP)
peace, *shalom*, *salam*, *shanti*; simplicity and faiths' identification of 'desire'
(Buddha), 'coveting' and 'greed';
environment see Shap Working Party 2008 *The Environment* (The Shap Working
Party on World Religions in Education)
- **challenging all communities**
e.g. simplicity - excesses of Christmas, weddings; consumerism
equality – access to education and health; female foeticide in Asia.
- **guiding us in building interfaith understanding (in each sense)** e.g.
peace – conflict resolution, acknowledging hurt of other

Implications for education and nurture

Informing ourselves about:

- central emphases of 'faiths'
- 'religious literacy' - society's dynamics e.g. need for identity
- impact of international events on UK communities

Immersing ourselves in the words of poets, sages and saints for whom barriers between 'faiths' are a nonsense

Sharing these words

Implications for education and nurture

Providing opportunities for:

- Understanding ourselves – our assumptions; we are all conditioned and can all be agents
- Understanding others through visual art, fiction, poetry, drama, music
- Quiet

My next step?

- **Listen** (e.g. to taxi driver; to speaker on radio/TV), read, reflect
- **Invite** (e.g. a neighbour to my house; a parent to my class; groups to use our premises; someone – possibly from Meeting - to **share** experiences, food, stories etc with the children's group)
- **Visit** (e.g. a nearby church; a neighbour; an exhibition; a shop – Polish/Iranian/Pakistani etc; religious sites on holiday)
- **Enable** e.g. dialogue, practical projects

Teachers may

- invite individuals who can share their 'mixedness'
- increase resourcing on interfaith relations and initiatives
- vigilantly avoid generalising and stereotyping
- challenge the limitations of a '6 distinct world faiths' approach
- encourage pupils in community projects that cross supposed boundaries

Last words

- We are called to be the salt of the earth. There is no expectation of the whole earth becoming salt. We can bring out the best flavour of others. (A Chinese Christian, BBC radio 4, 10 August 08)
- The flowers of unselfish living may be found growing in other people's gardens and... rich fruits of the Spirit may be tasted from other people's trees. (Marjorie Sykes in *Quaker Faith and Practice* 1999, 27:11)

Last words

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear makes them strangers.

(William Penn 1693, in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1999, 27: 1)

