

World Religion Day.
Sunday 15 January 2006, 6.30pm – 8.30pm
Flinders University

Interfaith Dialogue on Peace
A Christian Perspective: Geoff Boyce

I should begin with some disclaimers.

Obviously, I present only a personal perspective – I do not speak for the Christian Church, since there are not only a variety of churches but also a variety of perspectives about peace.

Secondly, I am not a professional theologian; I am a lay-person benefiting from the insights of others and trying to make sense of it all the best I can within the limitations in which I find myself.

Given the topic of 'peace, I thought I might say something about our chaplaincy here at Flinders and how we have come to be a community of colleagues of various religious traditions, pursuing a common vision of service to the university community – if I might say, a wonderful model of interfaith cooperation. I have always thought that we have little to say to the community unless we ourselves are able to practice what we preach.

Our commonality might best be described within the emerging understanding of spirituality.

Let me read the opening paragraph of David Tacey's book, *The Spirituality Revolution*, which introduces strands within the sketches I will share in this seminar.

A spirituality revolution is taking place in Western and Eastern societies as politics fails as a vessel of hope and meaning. This revolution is not to be confused with the rising tide of religious fundamentalism, although the two are caught up in the same phenomenon: the emergence of the sacred as a leading force in contemporary society. Spirituality and fundamentalism are at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. Spirituality seeks a sensitive, contemplative, transformative relationship with the sacred, and is able to sustain levels of uncertainty in its quest because respect for mystery is paramount. Fundamentalism seeks certainty, fixed answers and absolutism, as a fearful response to the complexity of the world and to our vulnerability as creatures in a mysterious universe. Spirituality arises from love of and intimacy with the sacred, and fundamentalism arises

from fear of and possession by the sacred. The choice between spirituality and fundamentalism is a choice between conscious intimacy and unconscious possession.¹

I now wish to address my remarks to Christians, and invite you all to listen in, if you will.

The greatest violence I have felt has been inflicted, not by people of other religions, but by those who claim to be Christian. When I have shown hospitality to Pagans, I have been demonised as if I myself were the very devil; I discovered that even a “freedom of Information” order was served on the University to see what I might have privately emailed to be used against me! When I have attended prayer with the Muslims, if only to see that their facilities are adequate, because they are too polite to suggest otherwise, and suggested to these so-called Christians that we might pray together for peace, I had Bible verses thrown at me about Jesus being the only way. For them, not possible! All efforts to get these so-called Christians to meet and talk with the Muslim students were torpedoed by the so-called Christian leadership.

Later I heard these so-called Christians claim they love the Muslims. The incongruity of this perplexed me for some time. Then it dawned on me that this so-called love must simply be an *intellectual proposition*. They sincerely *believed* they loved Muslims. From their perspective, one had to love them for them to become Christians. But if I were to ask for this love to be described, to be spelt out in tangible actions, what was there? Love was just in the mind as a belief, because, of course, Christians are supposed to love everyone!

Secondly I learnt that underneath the façade of words, these so-called Christians adopted a two-fold negative theology to anything that did not conform to their world and their language. Firstly, anything else but *their* beliefs and culture was seen as unclean; anything else was contaminated; contact with anything else would destroy the purity which is what they believed God requires.

Theologian Mirislav Volf reflecting on the cycle of violence in his

¹ David Tacey *The Spirituality Revolution* HarperCollins. 2003 p.11

native Croatia in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* explains how Jesus adopted the opposite theology:

In the Palestine of Jesus' day, "sinners" were primarily social outcasts, people who practiced despised trades, failed to keep the Law as interpreted by the religious establishment, and Gentiles and Samaritans. A pious person had to separate herself from them; their presence defiled because they were defiled. Jesus' table fellowship with social outcasts, a fellowship that belonged to the central features of his ministry, turned this conception on its head: The real sinner is not the outcast but the one who casts the other out ... Sin is not so much a defilement but a certain form of purity: the exclusion of the other from one's heart and one's world. In the story of the prodigal son, the sinner was the elder brother – the one who with-held an embrace and expected exclusion. Sin is a refusal to embrace the other in her otherness and a desire to purge her from one's world, by ostracism or oppression, deportation or liquidation. The exclusion of the other is an exclusion of God.²

So I discovered that it is possible to fool oneself that one has the right theology, a clinically 'clean' theology, but it turns out to be completely wrong; the real test is how one's ideal is actually practiced, how is it life-giving to the other.

The second thing I discovered about these so-called Christians was that they adopted a theology of conflict. They are about having power. I can never forget this statement to me by their leader: "The first thing I decide about chaplains is whether they are for me or against me." I can never forget it because I remember how gobsmacked I was!

How we deal with conflict and difference is vital, particularly in a world that is getting smaller and smaller. But how does one relate to those who adopt a stance that begins with the assumption that anyone who is different or doesn't agree with them is the enemy, and to be fought against. Such a stance satisfies the myth of purity – by keeping

² Miroslav Volf, in *Emerging Voices in Global Theology*, William A. Dyrness (Ed). Zondervan 1994. P 31-32

everyone else at a distance. This is the theology of the wall, the high fence and guard dogs, and the clinically clean smart bomb. This is the theology of exiled islands and detention centres away from human view. Volf observes that distance cannot bring peace – it may give warring parties breathing space – but it is a passive form of violence.

But more importantly, what I discovered from these experiences of reaching out to the stranger, uncomfortable though the initial experience might have been, since I also had been brought up on this separatist, elitist theology, - I discovered that I became a bigger person. My world expanded. I began to learn all kinds of things about myself, previously hidden to me during my sheltered past. I discovered that I *need* the other, I am incomplete without the other. My Christian faith was enriched rather than threatened. Without the other I am diminished.

Could this be the dynamic behind religious diversity? Could it be that hoping everyone else should be like me, by converting to my religion, is counterproductive – or to put it theologically, not what God has in mind? Could it be that we must protect and work *for* religious diversity, not work against it?

So how has it been that the Flinders chaplains seem to have been able to avoid the religious dog-fights that seem to continue to plague Christian factions?

Firstly I think we have been very fortunate at a very human level with the maturity of each of the group. But perhaps the very aggression of the conservative Christian group provided a foil that helped us define ourselves against such aggression. By supporting each other in the face of it, we came to respect each other, to recognise each other's right to be who we were without competition for status or power over each other.

Secondly, we had to redefine what our role could be in an environment that is generally disengaged from religion, if not sceptical or opposed. We did this by agreeing to use the language of spirituality. "Nurturing spirit and building community" became our chaplaincy touchstone. This common mission, framed within the

universal language of wholeness, well-ness, and relationship gave us the ground to come together despite our religious differences. Spirituality is universal, no matter what religion or none. So a chaplaincy that 'nurtures spirit and builds community' could be very useful to the university.

It helped that Dr David Tacey, at Latrobe University, was also exploring this, offering a subject simply called "Spirituality" to first year students in the liberal arts. The response to his subject has been overwhelmingly positive. These students were almost entirely non-religious, demonstrating that we are entering a post-secular age. And even religious students found new dimensions to their faith by being permitted to engage in these open-ended explorations. Multifaith Chaplaincy has benefited by the understandings David Tacey has made possible through the research he has been undertaking with his students.³

I think what we have stumbled across is that by focussing on spirituality and building relationships in service to the university and seeking to nurture what is life-giving in each other within that paradigm, we have sufficiently overcome the fear of strangeness of each other's religion to begin to appreciate each other for who we are, including our religious traditions.

We maintain fidelity within our traditions but we have reduced the power of exclusion. In fact, we have grown to like each other, to become good friends while we accept and live with our differences.

We are making our own contribution to peace in our own situations.

I hope these brief sketches, these personal confessions, have been helpful; perhaps stimulating your own reflections, evoking memories, eliciting insights into your own religious struggles. Have I been true to my brief to provide a *Christian* perspective on peace? I hope so because the Jesus who was the friend of the outcast and the excluded ones, as we heard in the reading, continues to be the source of my inspiration and hope and exemplar of shalom-peace.

³ David Tacey *The Spirituality Revolution* HarperCollins. 2003