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RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN A GLOBALISED ERA

BY

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Donald Reeves has been awarded the Tschelebi Peace Prize for fostering good relations between the Abrahamic faiths.

The Award is part of the Zentralinstitut Islam-Archiv at Soest in West Germany. It is the oldest Islamic organization in Germany. The jury of this Peace Award consists of Muslims, Jews and Christians. It is given annually to a German non-Muslim as well as to NGOs involved in dialogue. There is a national, international and group award.

This year the award has been given to Konrad Raiser, former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, and to the House of Religions in Hanover.

Donald Reeves is this year's International Peace Recipient.

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I am most grateful to Dr Ibrahim Al Naimi for the invitation to speak on 'Religious Upbringing and Contemporary Challenges in a Globalised Era'. This is my fourth visit to Doha. I am delighted to be here and to participate in this Conference. Thank you.

I have tried to make this difficult subject as manageable as possible. I have therefore chosen a personal and straight-forward approach.

I understand globalization as a world which is being transformed into a universal free market, which transcends national boundaries. I note too that the casualties of this transformation are the weakest and the poorest.

Today we are made aware of each other's religion inconceivable fifty years ago: interfaith activity was regarded as strange, strictly for specialists.

As a boy I had lessons in religion, but they were confined to Christianity and the Church of England. I still have my note books when as an eight year old I had to write down what a church is, what a priest is. There was nothing about Judaism, Islam, Eastern religions, let alone other Christian Churches.

That has now changed. There is considerable awareness of different religions. But awareness is not the same as knowledge. In spite of the internet and, for some, easy access to travel, there is still widespread ignorance, a striking ignorance about religion. A little knowledge is dangerous. Ignorance fuels prejudice and prejudice fear of 'the other'. The stranger is not welcome.

My early memories of religious education created a vacuum ready to be filled by caricatures. Up to the time I left Cambridge University I had never met a Muslim or a Jew. My experience is not unique among my generation, nor in younger generations.

I want to propose a programme for 'religious upbringing in a globalised era'. The programme has two elements: The Practice of Solidarity, and Conversation and Study.

There is much criticism of interfaith dialogue. 'Why do you go to these solemn meetings?' I am often asked. Another asked: 'What do they achieve?' (And behind this question lay a further question about measuring: measuring the outcome). Or as I am told frequently: 'You all sit round the table on some top floor while on the ground floor a fire is raging!' Most of us are aware of these criticisms but the fires can be brought under control and inter-religious dialogue has to make a significant contribution.

THE PRACTICE OF SOLIDARITY

The context I know best is the United Kingdom, Western Europe and the Balkans, particularly Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo. So what I have to say comes out of this context.

Solidarity means standing in the shoes of the other – particularly when the 'other' is marginalized or persecuted. Solidarity is not just an attitude.

Imagine for a moment a synagogue in East London. It has been vandalized; anti-Semitic slogans are scrawled on the walls. A neighbouring cemetery has had the Jewish graves ripped up, destroyed. Then, following this vandalism, the local mosque and the local churches together express their solidarity with the local Jewish community.

Imagine an arson attack on a mosque in East London: many of the Muslim community are frightened. They feel unsafe. Then the local synagogue and local churches together condemn the arson and express their solidarity with the Muslim community.

Imagine a church in East London. The doors have been forced open; the cross on the altar has been broken. The church has been desecrated. Then the local synagogue and local mosques together express their solidarity with the Christian community.

A demonstration is organized by the three communities; it is disrupted by extremists and in spite of a strong police presence there is a sense of possible violence on the streets. But the demonstration continues on its way to each of the three places of worship, a mosque, a church and a synagogue where speeches of friendship are made and prayers offered to God.

That is an expression of solidarity, part real, part imagined. But to arrive at this point, this act of solidarity, takes a lot of time and effort. The local religious leaders have over the years taken time to get to know each other. They and their communities have often visited each others place of worship. The mosque, the synagogue and the church were accessible to each of the other communities. Slowly each community begins to have a sense of the others, their culture, traditions and their worship. Friendship grows, meals are shared. Time and again people said: 'Well I never realized what it is like to be a Jew, a Muslim or a Christian here.' This is already happening in places like Leicester in England and Duisburg in Germany. But these are the exception and not the rule.

In most places there remain problems. Some members of these communities do not want to get involved in what is seen as being too political. (The demonstrations I mentioned could well have happened after 9:11 or after the London or Madrid bombings.) Some members left their places of worship. The rabbi, priests and imams faced conflict among their communities; none of these leaders were used to handling these disagreements; sometimes the authority of those leaders was challenged and appeals to the sacred texts of those communities compounded the divisions because of different interpretations of these texts.

The emerging solidarity which I have described has also to be replicated regionally, nationally and internationally. In other words, the growing of solidarity has to become a 'movement', to resist marginalization and persecution of religious minorities.

I have been involved in peace building in the Balkans for ten years. One thing I have learnt is that peace building depends on establishing networks of firm working relationship with the 'enemy' so that those who are not like us become our partners.

This is also true of inter-religious dialogue.

CONVERSATION AND STUDY

'Dialogue' is now the word to describe many of the activities under the interfaith umbrella. But it has become overused to the point that the word is almost meaningless. In Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, recently I met an official from the European Union; I was trying to get financial support for our work of mediation, bringing together the Serbian Orthodox monks from the monastery of Decani together with local Kosovo Albanian Muslims between whom relations have been strained since the war there ten years ago. The official said to me: 'We have done dialogue.'

So there is much to be said for another way of describing the processes of talking, listening, paying attention, appreciating other religions, other cultures and traditions. This is Conversation: an art we have almost lost in the West.

I have been lucky enough to have experienced conversation, where listening is intense, but not without laughter, where conversation is real, serious but not solemn. In Bosnia the Soul of Europe had been commissioned to bring together Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims to agree on a Memorial demanded by the survivors of Omarska, a killing camp where hundreds of Muslims were murdered during the Bosnia War. Our brief was clear: we had to persuade both parties, Serbs and Bosniaks, to get round the table, to plan the Memorial. To assist us in this tricky task we invited a group of about a dozen young Serbs and Bosniaks to meet with the Soul of Europe regularly. Those conversations in Prijedor, the town nearest to the killing camp, during a hot, dusty summer in gardens and later throughout a bitterly cold winter in a smoke-filled café run by returnee Muslims, were a model of attention in which disagreements were expressed but where the listening never faltered.

Who then should participate in these conversations, and what should be their subject, given the title of this lecture: 'Religious Upbringing in a Globalised Era'?

Everyone should be invited to 'the table', not just those who are committed to inter-religious dialogue, but particularly those who might be considered 'spoilers'. I am thinking for example of those who justify terrorism by quoting from the Qur'an, those who validate settlement in the West Bank with references to the Hebrew prophets, those who ransack the Book of Revelation to sanction their government's policies in Israel and the Middle East.

Those who use sacred texts in this way regard religion as a means to restore certainty in an conflicted world.

This quest for certainty, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is flourishing - understandably so, given the uncertain and even apocalyptic future unfolding before us.

I refer to the social and political effects of global warming with the possibilities of famine triggering movements of population; then the rapid expansion of the world's population will raise urgent issues concerning energy and food shortages. There is the persistent threat of small armed terrorist groups and the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons.

Yes those who wish to have nothing to do with these conversations have to realize, however difficult, that it is in their interest to participate. Sometimes those who stake their lives and faith on certainty are criticised for having little to do except to convert others to their way of thinking and living; whereas the rest of are too busy. I am reminded of the aphorism by Oscar Wilde who said: 'The trouble with socialism is that it takes all of your free evenings.'

The other growing and flourishing groups who need to be invited 'to the table' are those who say 'I am a good Muslim, but…' or 'I am a good Catholic, but….'

The word ‘but’ is significant.

Some years ago I was invited to participate in a Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Trinidad. I described the Soul of Europe’s attempt at encouraging the reconstruction of the Ferhadija Mosque in the city of Banja Luka in the Serb Republika Srpska part of Bosnia. We saw this work as a story of Muslim/Christian collaboration. The Ferhadija Mosque was one of fifteen destroyed during the Bosnia War in Banja Luka alone. All of them were blown up and the stones and foundations removed; a signal that the Islamic community was no longer welcome there.

When I had finished my speech a mufti from Trinidad told me: ‘The Bosnian people deserve to have their mosques destroyed: God was telling them they were not true Muslims.’ What is a ‘true’ Muslim? I have made many friends who were both Bosnian and Muslim. Some have become secularised, but they remained Muslim. One put it this way: ‘I am a Muslim in my heart, but I do not carry out all the religious observances.’ The question for these Muslims is what constitutes a ‘true’ Muslim in terms of his/her relationship to the world. I will look at this question later under the heading of ‘Segregation or Integration’.

Then particularly in Western Europe there are those who say they are Catholic but ignore the teachings of say, birth control issued by the Vatican. ‘I go to Mass,’ a friend says to me, ‘but not as often as I used to.’

Thus, apart from those drawn to inter-religious dialogue, to ‘the table’ need to be invited those who regard this activity as unnecessary and a waste of time, and those who calls themselves Jewish, Muslim or Christian but who have difficulties in making sense of their faith in relation to the way they live it out in the world.

What follows is the outline of a program for those committed to inter-religious conversations which need to be set up: schools, universities, academies of all kinds and religious institutions.

1 THE CRISIS OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

The crisis began in the 1960’s when in the West a new generation began to say: ‘We will not be told what to believe; we will find out for ourselves.’ Deference to authority disappeared. ‘We will make up our own minds.’ This has raised difficult questions for religious leaders. If they appeal to the Qur’an, the Torah or the Gospels then there are others who say: ‘These texts are not correct for today,’ and will refer to others.

This is a major issue for all religions, compounded by one of the effects of globalization through the Internet. Not only is there choice for everyone, there is also scholarship and learning, so the academic’s study is no longer a privileged place.

Authority is not just about theoretical questions. As I noted in my example from East London the local religious leaders were faced with intense reactions, some enthusiastic, some highly critical to the extent that a number of people no longer appeared at worship.

There is a significant question for religious and community leaders: how can they be helped to deal with conflict in their communities? Most of us are not trained to do this. But there is now a substantial body of work, theoretical and practical, on conflict resolution and peace building which should be drawn on.

A basic issue over authority needs to be opened up, to find out what is more or less relevant in this day and age. Difficult. I would mark up one particular area for discussion, but without proposing a solution: and that is the question about democracy. How far should some religious institutions embrace democracy in which the voices of everyone are heard, in order to eventually reach compromise? In different Christian Churches one can find striking differences about the way decisions are made. In Eastern Orthodoxy the decisions are made by the Bishop, and there can be no disagreement. Some forms of Protestantism also have a top down authoritarian leadership. If you don't like the decisions made then you have a choice: to live with it or leave. There are other Churches where decisions are debated and decided at every level.

Together with teasing out issues around authority comes consideration of leadership, and training for leadership.

2 SACRED TEXTS

Religious leaders often refer to their text to reinforce their arguments, but as noted earlier interpretations of these ancient texts can be manipulated for political and other reasons.

There is consequently a major task awaiting the Abrahamic Faiths to discover how these texts should be read and interpreted.

However difficult this task may be and complicated, it is necessary, and far beyond the scope of this lecture. But there is a recent development about reading Sacred Texts which promises a possible way forward for different Faiths to study them together.

This is the practice of Scriptural Reasoning. Representatives from different traditions gather to study common themes in the Qu'ran, the Torah and the New Testament: for example those that concern our common humanity, the nature of friendship and issues of the world's creation. What began in America in 1994 among academics is beginning now in the UK and in the US to be undertaken outside universities, in meeting places and churches, mosques and synagogues. There is something compelling about listening to a Rabbi expounding say the story of Jonah and the Whale, and then from the Qu'ran a Muslim scholar staying close to the text, expounding the same story; and then a Christian recounting the same story from the Christian Bible. This practice is inclusive: it should and needs to include those for whom certainty is central and those who share a more open perspective, women as well as men.

3 THE IMAGINATION

A neglected area in inter-religious conversation and study is the Imagination. Religious leaders have often been suspicious of the Imagination because they fear its uncontrollable and anarchic qualities. However it is through the Imagination that one comes closer to the heart and soul of each religious faith, as it manifests itself in art, music, painting, dance, sculpture, design and artefacts used in rituals.

4 SEGREGATION OR INTEGRATION

Here is a story: it begins in the back streets of Leeds, a northern town in the UK. A hundred years ago it used to be a working class community, generation following generation down the mines and into the mills of Northern England. That community no longer exists. A Muslim community, mostly families from Pakistan, live there now. Nadia was born there thirty years ago; her parents were and remain devout Muslims. Nadia's mother says: 'We are Muslim; before everything else we are Muslim.' The parents made an important decision. To give their clever daughter the best education possible, giving her the best opportunities for a future career, and sent her to one of the best schools in the area, away from the Muslim community, but they insisted one her wearing different clothes from the other girls, trousers to cover her legs instead of short skirts. Nadia worked hard, and went to University where she joined the secular European young adult culture and left her Qur'an at home. She gained a first class degree, then a doctorate and is now a University lecturer, married to a Muslim and living in an expensive suburb of the city where she was born.

The human cost of this success story is not immediately apparent. Nadia's family, including members living in Pakistan, became extremely distressed. They felt they had lost their daughter, that she had betrayed them. Nadia's determination to succeed concealed much anguish: guilt and confusion. She had problems with her identity, was she a Pakistani Muslim or British? For years there were considerable strains at home: arguments, silences, tempers lost. The human cost of Nadia's gradual acceptance of her identity as a British Muslim was considerable, although somewhat eased by her marriage to a Muslim, a respected member of the community.

Nadia's experience is typical of many across Europe and beyond, and from different Faith communities. Her parents consider themselves Muslim, even above being British. Whenever they leave the Muslim community in Leeds, to visit the seaside on holiday or go to other places in Britain, they have learned to put up with racist abuse: 'Go back to where you belong, etc…' That is the price paid for living in a community that is effectively segregated, and therefore a target for suspicion, racist and cultural prejudice.

The local imam and the mosque supported Nadia's parents. They too considered that Nadia had betrayed her parents and turned into a 'bad' Muslim. However Nadia is proud of her Muslim soul, the traditions that raised her. The story of her life continues – now she has children of her own.

Her story shows how difficult it is for minorities. Should they allow themselves to be segregated as much as possible, in which case they will be regarded with suspicion by their host countries, and their communities become ghettos. History tells us what happens to people in ghettos. Or should they integrate themselves, and risk losing their identity? 'Religious upbringing' has to include public discussion at every level, local, national and international. The issues are too important to be put aside, not least because of the human cost, as Nadia's story shows.

5 THE WORLD – RESISTING IDOLATRY

Recently a survey of 24 year olds from London asked what these young people felt about school: what is a school for? The unanimous response was: 'to improve social

skills'. Why did they think that necessary? 'To get a good job.' Nothing illustrates better the way that the 'markets' have taken over in the West as representing life's purpose. I object strongly to the way in which the ideology of the market has invaded the territory of those of us whose mandate is to provide answers to the fundamental question: 'What is our purpose as human beings?' What is it that God wills for Creation? This market ideology has crowded out many opportunities for sacrifice, generosity and kindness – those immeasurables without which life becomes bleak and soulless.

So there is a huge task to examine the fundamental assumptions about the world we have constructed, noting how they work in practice – not least noticing the widening gap between rich and poor. The Faiths need to reclaim that territory of questions about the meaning and purpose of life; not leave the market unchallenged.

On my first visit to Sarajevo overlooking the city on a summer evening I heard the Call to Prayer: 'I bear witness that there is no divinity but Allah.' In other words: 'you shall have no other idols'.

6 LEARNING THE ART OF DIALOGUE – A SPECIAL SORT OF CONVERSATION.

In a speech to the Christian and Muslim Conference of Scholars in London in March 2010 Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury described dialogue as 'growing together'.

This is what he said:

In every single human life we see something of how the infinity of God's mystery winds itself into the mystery of a human life and personality.
Every human face reflects something of that mystery.
Every human face is worth attending to.
Every human voice is worth hearing.

How much more so when you see another human face, and hear another human voice directed towards God. The language that the other person uses about God may not be the language you use; you may disagree and find areas of enormous strangeness between you. And you will still want to say: 'In that attention to the other I will discover something of God'.

That is what the Archbishop means by 'growing together'. So the question remains to be considered: How can the newcomer to inter-religious dialogue/conversation learn the art of 'dialogue' so that he or she experiences it as 'growing together'.

Dialogue does not just happen. It is an art to be learnt: skills in listening and facilitating.

Therefore there is a need for opportunities for people to come together to learn and practise the art and skills of dialogue.

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Many who are committed to inter-religious dialogue are modest; claims to truth are held, certainly, but they have developed an intrinsic gentleness and openness to the world.

Modesty is not weakness. If the fires I mentioned at the start of this paper are to be extinguished, then inter-faith, inter-religious dialogue and its working out in solidarity as I have described need to become a 'movement'. Nothing less will do – not least to counter the extremists from all sides who constantly grab the headlines. As I prepared this paper, I read of a pastor in Florida who on the anniversary of 9:11 was going to burn a copy of the Qur'an. Nothing could be more offensive to Muslims throughout the world, and such an act harms Christianity itself. It could be said that this is how Christians view Islam. To resist this, those of us committed to another way have to be prepared to speak and act consistently and boldly and together.

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In this paper I have described the elements in the practice of solidarity, and have proposed areas for further conversation and study. I am aware that the title of this lecture could be directed towards young people: what are we to teach them? We have to first make a clearing in the forest. Once there is some clarity about the issues I have described, about our 'own religious upbringing', and in the minds of those who have a responsibility for passing on our religious traditions, then the paths will be clearer for us to follow.

Thank you for your attention.

Donald Reeves