

Faith and Change: A Christian Understanding

David F. Ford

Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge

Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme

Christian-Muslim Seminar

Lambeth Palace,

17-18 January 2002

Paper contributed by the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme: interfaith.cam.ac.uk

In a BBC broadcast last year, the Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sachs said that the events of September 11th were the greatest challenge to the religions of the world since the wars of religion in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this paper I will start from there in order to draw from history some positive lessons about civil society and about the possibility of peace with integrity between religious traditions that have been in deadly conflict, as well as some negative lessons about secularism and about religious responses to modernity. I will suggest that there is a need to do better justice to the character of our society as 'religious-and-secular' and to the nature of healthy religious responses to modernity. Next, I will propose ten theses about Christian faith and change. I will conclude with six items for a future agenda between Christians and Muslims that might enable them to work out together better ways of drawing on the resources in their traditions for peacemaking amidst current changes.

1. Learning from History: A Key to the Relationship of Faith to Change

The period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is a good place for a Christian and a European to start in considering '*Faith and Change*'. Its religious wars played a crucial part in a transformation of Europe that involved changes which still shape our world: the development of nation states; secularisation (with separation of religious from political and other institutions, and religion having less identifiable cultural influence); colonising and imperialisms that affected most of the rest of the world; the global spread of Christianity; political, scientific, technological and industrial revolutions; constitutional democracy; and mass education. None of the world faiths has been insulated from these developments, and all have in fact changed as a result of them; but Christianity has had a uniquely direct involvement with them.

A key question in the aftermath of September 11th is therefore: what lessons can be learnt from that history? The imperative of learning from history is deeply embedded in Christian scriptures. It is indeed a vital key to the relationship between faith and change. A great deal of the Old Testament is historical narrative from which lessons are continually being drawn; the prophets are concerned with discerning the meaning of the events of their time in relation to God's purposes; the wisdom literature is distilled from centuries of trying to understand personal, social and economic life with a view to human flourishing (and what prevents it); and the praising and lamenting of the Psalms are often closely related to the ups and downs of Israel's history. The New Testament pivots around the historical events of Jesus Christ's life,

death and resurrection, in the light of which past, present and future are understood. Life now is lived oriented towards the Kingdom of God, as portrayed in the parables of Jesus, and faithful anticipation of that requires alert responsiveness to new events, tasks, possibilities and people.

Each period of Christian history has provoked attempts to understand its meaning in the purposes of God. Perhaps the most influential in the West has been Augustine's City of God, written during the collapse of the Roman Empire. The greatest trauma after that was the rise of Islam, and a good deal in Medieval European and Byzantine Christianity can be understood as responding to Islam – militarily, intellectually, religiously.

Then in the fifteenth century came the Reformation and the split in Western Christianity. This was a time of vibrant Christian renewal, as well as devastating warfare which discredited Christianity in the eyes of many. The danger to which the Chief Rabbi points is that a similar discrediting, this time applying to all the conflicting religions, may be happening on a global scale now - already religion is a leading factor in many major conflicts.

But what if September 11 were to act as a shock sufficient to mobilise Muslims, Christians and others to try to avoid loss of life on the scale of the seventeenth century's Thirty Years War, and instead to find a wisdom that could contribute to a more peaceful and flourishing world in which the resources of the religions for peace are drawn upon more fully than ever before?

This Seminar could be a sign that it is possible. From both Christian and Muslim standpoints, it is better to trust that this rather than religious war is in accord with the will of a God of peace, and that the seeking of the required wisdom will be blessed by God.

But what might be the lessons of the European wars of religion?

(a) Two Positive Lessons from European Wars of Religion

There are two major positive lessons.

(i) The Need for Civil Society

One constructive and partly successful response to deadly religious conflict was to develop the institutions, laws and customs of civil society. This was in many countries as much the project of Christians who were appalled at the bloodshed in the name of their faith as it was of those who were disillusioned with Christianity as well as with war. There was collaboration among those who wanted peace through constitutional settlements, civil institutions, and distributions of power and privilege that limited the possibility of religious differences leading to international or civil war.¹ There was also resistance, refusal to cooperate, and even violence from those who wanted the settlement to be on their terms alone. But overall the advocates of civil society succeeded, and for all the debates about the quality of its civility there is a broad consensus that civil society itself has been a major contributor to the common good.

It is no accident that one of the most insistent demands since September 11 has been for what one might call a more civil global society.² The Chief Rabbi's challenge might be developed as follows: Can Christianity, Islam, and the often non-religious or anti-religious protagonists of contemporary capitalism³ find the resources to weave a fabric of meaning that might shape the values, principles, agreements, laws, institutions and exchanges needed for global civil society?

(ii) The Need for Ecumenism

Another lesson is that it is possible for religious traditions which have engaged in deadly conflict to change with integrity and, without resolving all their differences, to live in peace with their main emphasis on conversation and cooperation. That is in fact the story of the European Churches. Its climax came in the twentieth century Ecumenical Movement.⁴ Much of the inspiration for this came from beyond Europe, but within Europe a crucial factor was the experience of total war and mass killings justified by ideologies. There are many

interpretations of that movement's significance, and there have been many other factors in the transformation of Europe's religious situation.

Yet it is likely that any efforts to increase understanding and make peace between religions today would have to include elements whose worth has been shown where the Ecumenical Movement has been effective: every level - local, regional, national and international – is involved; there are bilateral and multilateral dialogues and agreements; a good deal of thorough study, discussion and publication has been essential; where the process has gone well, both leadership and extensive institutional support (including financial) have been important; and there is realism about the timescale required – divisions that developed and were reinforced over centuries need time to be understood and negotiated, and attempts to take shortcuts can be more disastrous than not engaging at all.⁵

(b) Two Negative Lessons

The partial successes of civil societies and of the ecumenical movement offer resources that can lead in the direction of the wisdom needed in the present situation, but the negative lessons of the European experience also need to be learnt. These are primarily two.

(i) The Failure of Secularism in a Religious-and-Secular World

First, the civility of the European settlements was extremely partial and prone to violence. Religious warfare was succeeded by imperial conquest and rivalry; French, Russian and other revolutions; and a twentieth century in which secular ideologies of communism, fascism and capitalism flourished and fought, resulting in hundreds of millions of casualties. The lesson of this is that secularism has failed even more terribly than religion.

The symbolism of September 11 was profound: it focussed on the global economics of the World Trade Center and the global military power of the Pentagon (and may also have been aimed at the global political power of the White House). The main response has been in terms of military muscle and an alliance based on America's political, economic and military power. The lesson of European history and its global influence is that, whatever its short-term justification, this is unlikely by itself to lead to the peace of global civil society.

Those secular forces centred on money and arms only have access to the resources of soul, wisdom, compassion, and hope when they are set in a larger, richer fabric of meaning and purpose. One modern version of such a fabric is secular humanism with a vision of a civil, humane and just world. Desirable though that might be, it is often unaware of its dependence upon older, religiously-influenced institutions, understandings and patterns of life, and has hardly yet displayed the depth, resilience and life-shaping capacity needed to form communities that can heal the divisions of our world.⁶

We have to face the religious-and-secular reality of our world. This reality is seen in two ways.

First, the main secular ideologies have either failed or shown their serious inadequacy, and even in crude statistical terms the vast majority of the world's population are likely to identify with one or other of the world's faiths for the foreseeable future.

Second, the secular myth of a neutral framework, with rational criteria against which to measure quality, costs and benefits (over against more partial, biased, traditional frameworks and criteria associated with religions) rightly appears less plausible than previously. Nobody has a neutral overview from nowhere, and the superiority complex of modernity in relation to religion (for all its justification in the terrible record of religion, but now balanced by a comparable secular record) can be seen as one strategy of one worldview in a bid for universality and power.

The alternative is a global civil society in which participants (including those with no religious commitment) find resources for peacemaking and serving the common good within their own traditions and through conversation and deliberation with others, and learn how to understand each other and collaborate without anyone being able to assume the role of neutral

referee enforcing agreed rules. For that, intensive engagement between the participants is vital, seeking a wisdom that does justice to history and to each other as well as to their own convictions. The present Seminar might be a sign that this can happen.

(ii) Inadequate Religious Responses

The second negative European lesson is about the failure or at least serious inadequacy of many Christian responses to the massive transformations of which the religious wars were part.

The least adequate responses are at the extremes of a continuum. One extreme allows the transformations and accompanying modern understandings to assimilate Christianity. This is adaptation in which nothing distinctively Christian is allowed a formative role. It is clearly inadequate from a Christian standpoint, since it evacuates Christianity of any continuing relevant content. Yet even a Christianity that is in principle against such assimilation can easily slide into it. The danger is increased by the circumstance that modern Western culture has been in closer symbiosis with Christianity than with any other faith. It may be that important lessons about alertness to assimilation and wise ways of avoiding it can be learnt by Christians from Muslims living in the West.

The other extreme attempts to prevent the transformations having any effect, preserving unchanged an earlier form of Christian faith and practice, and refusing any dialogue with modern understandings.

One form of this is attempted withdrawal from the modern world. The Christian critique of this questions its conception of God and Jesus Christ, its failure to affirm the goodness of creation (including many aspects of modernity), its avoidance of responsibility towards society, and its despair of possibilities of transformation for the better.

Another form tries to fight the modern world, dominate it, and reshape it according to its own religious vision. The Christian critique of this again relates to the conception of God and Jesus Christ, the goodness of creation, and a discerning response to modernity. In addition, there are questions about what form of communicating and spreading the Gospel are in harmony with the content of the Gospel and the example of Jesus Christ, and about the lessons to be learnt from the bloody history of such totalitarian religious ambitions.

Faced with extremes of assimilation to modernity or radical rejection of it, is there an alternative that has Christian integrity?

I see most types of Christianity today⁷ coming somewhere between the extremes on that continuum. They try to understand Christian faith in continuity with its origins and combine it with critical and constructive engagement with modern life and understanding. Faith and change are not alternatives: the key issue is to discern how they relate to each other. There is here a wisdom that needs to be worked out afresh in each period and situation.

This is especially urgent after September 11, because most discussions have lacked a crucial category for describing reality. This is the category of a religion that is neither absorbed by modernity nor simply rejects it but is engaged in simultaneously affirming it, judging it and transforming it. If the Muslims and Christians in this Seminar were to agree that this embodies the best wisdom of both of our traditions, that could be a momentous step forward. It could be the basis for intensive discussion about what is to be affirmed, and why, how, where, when, and by whom it is to be affirmed; about right judgement before God of modernity, our religious traditions, and our current situation; and about desirable transformations that follow from those affirmations and judgements and that draw on the resources of our traditions.

2. Christian Faith and Change: 10 Theses

What is the Christian understanding of faith and change that underlies the position being advocated: to refuse both assimilation to and rejection of modern changes; and instead to attempt to find a wisdom that appropriately affirms, judges and transforms them? I will put

forward briefly for discussion ten theses on Christian⁸ faith and change, any one of which could do with a paper to itself.

(i) Christian faith is above all in God who is intimately involved in ongoing history for the good of the whole of creation. Creation and human history are to be paid close and appreciative attention (feeding into praise and thanks to God) as being given by God and oriented to God's glory and full life with other people before God.

(ii) Change can be for the better, in line with the good purposes of God, or for the worse. Human participation in history requires continual discernment, learning, and taking of responsibility in the interests of change for the better. The most serious danger is idolatry, in which what is not God is absolutised, and relations with God, other people and creation are distorted. Discerning and resisting the tendencies to idolatry, and educating desire to be nonidolatrous,

are basic services to our societies.⁹

(iii) In Jesus Christ God has come together with the world so as to affirm radically its created goodness, to judge its sin and evil, and to transform it into the Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ was involved with change for the better and for the worse. The threefold realism of affirmation (seen especially in his ministry of healing, feeding, teaching, etc.), judgement (especially in his death), and transformation (especially in his resurrection) embodied in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is at the heart of Christian involvement with change in history.¹⁰

(iv) The Holy Spirit 'poured out on all flesh' is the continuing eventfulness of God in history, opening it up to God's purposes and enabling ongoing affirmation, judgement and transformation.

(v) Christians are called to be affirmed, judged and transformed by God through Jesus Christ for the sake of the affirmation, judgement and transformation of the world. This calling centres on their participation in the worshipping community of the Church.

(vi) With regard to the massive changes associated with modernity, there is a demanding task of wise discernment, accompanied by efforts, in collaboration with others, to heal both the religious traditions and modernity. Essential to Christian discernment is continuing conversation around scripture, drawing on the resources of tradition, the worldwide Christian community and the worldwide academic community. The indwelling of scripture through worship, prayer, study, the arts, academic disciplines, discussion, debate, and living in the world in faith is at the heart of lively Christian wisdom in response to change.

(vii) In relations with Muslims, whose own scriptures are likewise vital to discernment with regard to faith and change, any worthwhile mutual understanding will have to include sharing in the processes of scriptural interpretation (and the responses to historical developments involved in that) in both traditions. There should also be participation in this by Jews, as the eldest siblings of the Abrahamic faiths. Such intensive, long-term conversation around seminal texts while seeking wisdom for the contemporary world is a model of how to ensure that participants in a pluralist situation (including others besides Jews, Christians and Muslims) engage with each other at a level that allows for the discovery of shared wisdom.

(viii) Institutions, organizations and other structured focuses of life in society are vital arenas for facing the challenges of modernity (together with many serious challenges that have little to do with modernity). In line with my analysis of the importance of civil society in our religious-and-secular world, these must become places where religious resources for peace and flourishing are available. What is the potential for this in national and local government, the health service, business, the judicial system and prisons, education, the media, entertainment, and so on?

(ix) Part of the task of collaborative discernment and healing is to do with modern knowledge, its applications, and its institutions. Universities in particular are places where Christians,

Muslims, those of other faiths, and those identified with no faith come together in learning, teaching, scholarship and research with responsibilities in relation to students, knowledge, understanding and applications that are vital to the shaping of our world. At present many universities in the West (and elsewhere too) are strongholds of secularism. If they are to contribute constructively to understanding and peace in a religious-and-secular world they need to become religious-and-secular universities, where there can be sustained engagement with questions of truth and practice raised by, between and about the world's religions.¹¹

(x) Human history and achievements, together with society and its institutions, should not be seen as ultimates. They are penultimate, God and God's Kingdom alone are ultimate, and the beginning of wisdom is to recognise this. Realising the right relation of the ultimate to the penultimate is at the heart of wise living. A wrong emphasis on the penultimate can lead to compromising Christian faith, to assimilation, and to idolatry. An emphasis on the ultimate out of right relationship to the penultimate leads to fanaticism, religious warfare, and other forms of idolatry. Jesus Christ is neither compromiser nor fanatic, but lives affirming, judging and transforming the penultimate sphere while also orienting it towards ultimate transformation.¹² His followers are called to live in that dynamic, their basic act being to recognise the ultimacy of God through worship and through prayer for the Kingdom of God. One important penultimate goal in the present situation is a non-idolatrous, religious-and-secular civil society.

3. Items for a Future Agenda between Christians and Muslims

The events of September 11 have already produced considerable changes. In the light of the above understanding, what sort of agenda between Christians and Muslims might now help to generate further changes for the better?

(i)

The ultimacy of God. In what ways can the horizon of a God of peace, wisdom and compassion be shared by Christians and Muslims? Can we identify what in the relations of Christians and Muslims, and in their relations with others, most fully glorifies God? How can we help each other to be faithful to God in the current testing of our capacity for wisdom, peacemaking and compassion? What practices of prayer for each other should each adopt? How do we handle the fact that Muslims and Christians identify God very differently?

(ii)

Affirmation, judgement and transformation. Can Muslims and Christians collaborate in trying to find a wisdom of affirmation, judgement and transformation in relation both to each others' traditions and practices and to the developments of modernity? In dealing with modernity, is it right to avoid both extremes of assimilation and outright rejection? If so, how can this best be done by each community and by both in collaboration?

(iii)

A non-idolatrous religious-and-secular civil society. Is this the right interim goal, given the lessons of history and the present world situation? If so, how can it best be developed by Christians, Muslims and others, both nationally and internationally?

(iv)

Forms of collegiality for seeking and sharing wisdom. If the above items are to be taken seriously, appropriate groups, settings, structures and procedures are needed to enable Christians and Muslims to study, discuss, deliberate, and decide together. One concern which might be built into all wisdom-seeking (as it is into this Seminar) is to explore the possibility of agreeing on common and truthful descriptions of each community and its history and present situation. Christians and Muslims each have well-developed internal forms of collegiality, but almost no joint collegiality. This is the greatest single practical lack in the present situation between the two. What forms might joint collegiality take? Who might

initiate them? How might they be resourced? What might Christians and Muslims need to learn from each other,¹³ and what might both of them learn from other traditions¹⁴? What are the most stubborn issues, and how can they be faced? Is such collegiality fatally undermined by the missionary nature of each faith, or are there ways to have both collegiality and missionary integrity?

(v)

Signs of Muslim-Christian service of the common good. How might Muslims and Christians collaborate in serving the common good in every area of life? Instead of living up to the image of religion as causing division and conflict, how can they together serve peace, justice, the flourishing of civil society, and the seeking and sharing of wisdom for the common good? The aim should be to create signs of peacemaking in each sphere – politics, business, law, education, the media, and so on. What are the priorities here?

(vi)

Movements, networks, institutions, groups, friendships: the issue of scale. The problems and possibilities between Christians and Muslims are so profound and extensive that it is unlikely that anything less than a movement (cf. the Ecumenical Movement discussed above), or even more than one movement,¹⁵ would be able to have the desired impact. It is also possible to imagine networks, institutions and groups, with the face to face level being crucial if the essential element of trust is to be built up. But it is probably wise that there should be no master-plan. Perhaps the main lesson of the Ecumenical Movement is that it began in friendships. The most challenging question is: Are Muslims and Christians open to the friendships that God is inviting them into today?

[1] For an account of some of the leading eighteenth century approaches to history and the lessons that were learnt by historians, philosophers, jurists and others in the period after the wars of religion see J.G.A Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* Vols 1 and 2 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999). On the efforts in international law in a later period to create a more civilised world see Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations. The Rise and fall of International Law* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001).

Koskenniemi is especially concerned to learn from international law's successes and failures, and suggests that its 'fall' and widespread replacement by 'instrumentalism' has left the world poorly equipped to move towards a better global civil order. Yet his sharply perceptive history and analysis, which includes discussion of ethics, morality, norms, conscience, universality, interdependence, human rights, rationality, tradition, and natural law, is extraordinarily inattentive to religion. Islam, Christianity, even 'religion' do not appear in the index. Perhaps it is too much to hope that such inattention will become less common among Western academics after September 11.

[2] For a study of civil society by an international team of contributors who cover historical and contemporary aspects of it in the West and in the Southern hemisphere see Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Eds), *Civil Society. History and Possibilities* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001).

[3] The main focus of this Seminar is on these three, but it is important to take into account at least three others: Judaism, China and India. These, together with Christianity and Islam, have in common the engagement with capitalism and the presence of long and still lively wisdom traditions.

[4] For a perceptive summary of the Ecumenical Movement's history and significance (together with a short bibliography) see Geoffrey Wainwright's article in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* Ed. Adrian Hastings et al. (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000) pp.189ff..

[5] A new major feature of world Christianity which has so far had little to do with the ecumenism is the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement – it is estimated at about 300 million

and growing rapidly. Its main impact has not been in Europe, so is outside the scope of this section. It is a form of lively, popular religion that has often flourished in modern urban settings, and has learnt to practice and spread Christianity amidst rapid change. For a broad sociological account of Pentecostalism see David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Blackwell, Oxford 2002).

[6] Koskenniemi, in *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations* op.cit. is a good example of this. He recognizes the weaknesses of all the secular attempts to meet the problems of international affairs and ends on a rather despairing note, while also ignoring the significance of the world's religions.

[7] For a fuller discussion of this with reference to the types of Christian theology in the last two centuries see David F. Ford (Editor), *The Modern Theologians. An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Blackwell, Oxford 1997), especially the Introduction, in which a fuller account of a typology relevant to the present argument is given. Looking at the history of Christianity from the New Testament and the early Church and on through its later developments, I see there too the mainstream emphasis avoiding the two extremes described above.

[8] I hope that, if Muslim participants agree on the wisdom of affirmation, judgement and transformation, they might offer an Islamic understanding of them, or analogous concepts.

[9] For a perceptive historical, philosophical and theological treatment of this in the context of relations between religious traditions, see Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996) especially Part One 'A Meeting - Place for Truth' and within that pp. 19ff. on 'Education from Idolatry, and the Purification of Desire'.

[10] For a clear statement of this see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Collins, London 1964) especially Chapters 4 and 5.

[11] The same holds for schools. The UK government's recent recognition of the desirability of more faith-based schools is an important landmark in affirming that Britain is a religious-and-

secular society. In historical perspective this might later appear as a sign of official recognition (and by a political party that has had a militantly antireligious secularist strand) that the assumption of a linear 'progress' from religious past to non-religious future is not only wrong but damaging and dangerous. The task now is to make sure that the way these schools are conceived embody the lessons of history. One predictable reaction to September 11 was to condemn the whole idea because religions breed division and conflict. That 'eitherreligious-or-secular' line needs to be countered by a 'religious-and-secular' approach in which both religious communities and other parties show they have learnt from the best and worst in history.

[12] For a fuller account of the relation of ultimate and penultimate see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* op.cit. Chapter 4.

[13] If I ask about areas in which Christians in Britain might have lessons to learn from Muslims, they would include: insistence on faith needing to relate to the whole of life; the shaping of life with the help of disciplines such as regular prayer times; alertness to overassimilation, compromises and idolatries; importance of family life; wisdom about dealing with racism; honouring education and those who teach; global solidarity with fellowworshippers; and generous almsgiving.

[14] It is fascinating to trace how much each already owes to Jews and to Greeks. It may be that the present unprecedented availability of (and often engagement with) other traditions

such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, the modern natural and human sciences, and the arts of many cultures is an opportunity for enrichments, developments and joint learning among Christians and Muslims that would dwarf their debt to Judaism and Hellenism. [15] It is instructive that the Ecumenical Movement among Christians began as distinct movements (especially the missionary movement, Faith and Order, and Life and Work) whose coalition into the World Council of Churches has only ever been a very partial success.

© **CAMBRIDGE INTER-FAITH PROGRAMME**

Republished with permission

The Matheson Trust