

Prayer for Christian Unity and World Religion Day.

What do religions have in common? People. And that may be a good way to start to inform our approach to understanding how to meet with people of different religions.

Many people do not choose which religion they are born into, or are brought up in, or which is the dominant religion of the country they live in, nor do they set out to spread that religion, but are happy to live with it. and explain it to others or outgrow it or adopt other beliefs and lifestyles.

My background is in teaching and inspecting in schools where by law all children now learn about the main religions of the world. On my first course for Norfolk teachers I asked whether children in Norfolk schools needed to know about world religions. All of the schools from the smallest to the largest, in towns and in villages, in the countryside and by the sea, said it was essential for every child to learn about the world they were growing up in. They would meet these religions in their learning in school; they live in or near a university city; they may go to other parts of the UK for education, work or holidays; they may travel abroad; they will watch global sport and entertainment and news, and connect to a worldwide internet.

A fellow schools adviser in Norfolk offered to explain to teachers how the Jews have different groups, as in all religions, and she belonged to the liberal jews who adapt the strict traditions of orthodox jews to the needs of modern society. She also said she was Jewish because that was the religion of her parents and she could easily have been born into a christian family. Then there is another support teacher who regularly explained to teachers or children about being a Hindu in Norfolk, while the rest of her family are in medicine or training in medical school, and we know from the Covid crisis how many people of different religions work in the NHS. Just before Christmas, Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, a Hindu, lit a Diwali lamp on the step of No 11 Downing Street.

There are not as many members of different religions in Norfolk for people to meet as there are in the big cities because that is where the work was that brought people of different religions to the UK. I do not mean black people from the Caribbean, most of whom were Christian, but who who were still treated badly as the Windrush generation, even when they had been asked to come after the Second World War by the

British government to help run transport, health and other shortage industries. The British Army had soldiers from the Commonwealth, India, Africa, Asia and they were happy to stay and settle in the UK to help it get back on its feet. The British government even organised a recruitment drive to bring in workers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to work in the clothes factories in the mill towns in the north, where many still live.

When I started teaching in London in the 70's, Christianity and often just the Bible were what I was required to teach. There was talk and obvious evidence that Religious Education was just about tolerated in schools, sometimes neglected, and finding it difficult to compete with other subjects to fill exam classes, and seen by many as being on its last legs. I was trying hard in an enterprise where pupils told me I was teaching the wrong subject and they wanted me to use my obvious skills to help them succeed in other subjects. I tried using museum visits (which merely reinforced the past), films (which were still telling the same stories), case studies of people of faith in social work or church life (this was an improvement but Christians belonged to different churches), and moral issues where people were having to make choices but where Christians often argued over whether these were right or wrong or rejected science (these were more appealing to pupils).

Then came a number of events:

in 1972 Idi Amin, a dictator, expelled 5000 Asians who had British passports from Uganda, who then came to live in Britain, Other refugees were also coming and settling in the UK. All the children of these families, along with the children of Caribbean and Asian mill workers, were being taught in schools, and were well supported through extra language and smaller classes, and many teachers in all subjects were making use of their different cultures to help their learning. Schools were starting to include world religions in assemblies, community events, and in Religious Education. There was training for teachers on the different religions. The BBC and ITV educational programmes began to produce programmes about the religions being lived out in children's lives. To these resources were being added computer games and learning videos, and copies of artefacts used in religions were for sale to schools. In 1985 when I did an MA part-time in London, about the excitement computers were bringing to RE in the classroom, teachers' and pupils' learning had taken on a new lease of life. The increase in religions to study was non-threatening since you obviously were being asked to understand them not join them. The fact

that there were obviously religions all across the world which were being taken seriously by so many people gave a renewed credibility to asking questions about and searching for values, spirituality, purpose, relationships, morality. Christianity began to grow up among friends as it became one of the World Religions of today. Then in 1988 came the Education Reform Act (the first since 1944) which confirmed and supported the teaching of World Religions in all schools that is: "Christianity and the teaching and practices of other principal religions".

Too many? Are there too many numbers, colours, letters? A London teacher once told me the pupils in Norfolk only used brown and green in Art as those were the only colours they saw in the fields. Equipping the adults of tomorrow has always immersed them in all that society has to offer but giving them the skills to progress through clear and effective management and selection of their learning. It is important therefore that it is recognised that the adults of today do have a grounding in the religions of the world, but which is often ignored and not utilised after they have left school. Could not the same be said of speaking languages, advanced maths, or skills in sports we no longer take part in. Instead we are left to react to news items of extremism or conflict when they occur. Much better when our experiences continue to be informed by references in the media, and the world around us in sport, fashion, entertainment, what we buy and how we continue to interact with other people, who belong to different religions or have different religious backgrounds. I and my wife have been fortunate to travel to many places where the country's religion is not Christian, where people are happy to own and talk about beliefs, and show how they celebrate their faith in festivals, food, clothes, colour, buildings, and rituals, which may need taking account of when on a tour and staying in hotels. The importance of historical places and events may include religious references, and the diversity present in our global world of trade, ideas, traditions, migration, and charities is very evident.

As we meet people from different religions, it is useful to remember that many people are not experts in their own religions. They may only be a nominal member, and/or a member belonging to one particular interpretation of that religion. Therefore it is good to consider what do people and different religions have in common? What experiences do we share, through growing up in families, through working out morality, boundaries, making choices, having a different view from someone else? What are our hopes for a better future, what importance do we place on material gain, a successful career, how society treats crime, and makes laws, the attitudes we adopt towards our own well-being, our relationships, taking responsibility for our actions, caring for those

less well off? What people share with those without a religion is a dislike of hypocrisy: talking, not doing; preaching not practising; being regarded as not religious because they have made an informed choice not to belong to an organised religion.

But what divides people who do belong to a religion like Christianity? For three hundred years Christianity was a banned religion, its followers meeting in secret with a new holy day, Sunday, baptising new converts, and a characteristic ritual of breaking bread and drinking wine together. This changed when the Roman Emperor Constantine wins a battle in the year 313 using the cross as his symbol. Christianity becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire, spreading through its subject countries.

At the end of its first thousand years, Christian countries then divide on geographical lines, the Western churches remaining loyal to the Pope in Rome as leader of the Roman Catholic church, while the Eastern Orthodox churches recognise the Patriarch of Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey) as their leader.

After 500 hundred years more, the West saw a major movement begin in Europe to reform the practices and authority of the Roman Catholics. This led to a split between the Roman Catholics and those now called Protest(ant) churches. In England Henry the Eighth, as monarch, became Supreme Ruler of the Anglican Church; the Bible was translated from Latin to English and distributed widely so people did not need priests to interpret it for them; the bread and wine at Christian services no longer needed priests to change it into Jesus' body and blood, as his sacrifice had been made once and for all; faith in God's promise of forgiveness became more important for salvation than religious actions or financial legacies.

Over the centuries there have been wars and attempts at reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestants. Pressures for reforms have continued within the Roman Catholic Church, and other Christian Protestant denominations have been started to carry on more reforms of Christian understanding of worship, organisation, theology and beliefs about God, christology and beliefs about Jesus, church practices, patterns of authority, social obligations, ethics, views of the Bible, views of science. These groups are often described as "non-conformist".

Today there is a World Council of Churches including most Orthodox churches, Anglican churches and Protestant denominations, with the Catholic Church not a member but an observer. There is an annual **Week of prayer for Christian Unity** which begins today, and a movement called Ecumenism with mutual understanding between Christians as its aim and foundation. Both have been happening for many decades with limited success and inconsistent effort. **Which is why I support the idea of accepted diversity within an acknowledged unity.** Some of the differences will be minor, cultural or traditional and some will be fundamental; some will defy resolution and others may end in reconciliation. Within the Church of England which is an umbrella organisation covering a number of traditions, examples are the role of women, family planning and abortion, how literal to treat the Bible, the importance of science, technology and education, but these differences are reflected in other religions as well.

When it comes to what divides religions, there are important matters to bear in mind. There are authentic teachings and reference points within each religion, and these need to be understood in order to be able to challenge deliberate or unintentional manipulation of a religion by some of its members or leaders. Racism is still an issue for those in and those without a religion. Also extremism and violence against non-members or others who do not share your beliefs.

Three of the religions began in the same place, the Middle East. ISLAM: Muhammad, (peace be upon him) was born 1,450 years ago in Mecca in Saudi Arabia at a time when the Jewish and Christian religions were well established but when their followers were complacent. Arab tribes were at war with each other, exploiting the poor, and they had returned to worshipping idols which sold to make good money. CHRISTIANITY. Jesus was born 2000 years ago into a Jewish family when Jews had been expecting a Messiah (Greek "Christ") to deliver them from being occupied as part of the Roman Empire, but whose stated mission was to help redirect the Jews away from resentment at having to follow a set of detailed Jewish Laws towards an understanding of the loving God these laws were meant to be reflecting. JUDAISM. What their history had given the Jews was a basis through escape from slavery, victories on their way to a promised land, successful rulers, and eventually occupation by foreign powers, a sense of God on their side; a relationship or covenant with God in which they have an obligation to live

as God wishes them to – with care, consideration and charity for others and their environment. It has been said that to find out about Judaism ask a Jew not what they believe but what they do. Their Laws in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) spell out a Jew's religious and ethical obligations.

Meanwhile, other continents and countries not yet known to Europeans, had developed their own beliefs and religions. HINDUISM. Hinduism is the oldest of the main world religions. It is a collection of stories, traditions and beliefs of people living in Asia in and around India. Despite its many stories and pictures of Gods in its temples there is a fundamental belief in one God who is seen in three main forms creating, preserving and bringing to an end. In turn these feature in many different stories of battles between good and evil, visits to live among people, and teachings of how to live a successful life. BUDDHISM. Buddhism was started by a Hindu prince who lived in India 500 years before Jesus, and who was concerned with the question of why people suffer and how to overcome this. The result of his search for enlightenment has been passed on ever since by followers who took his message and practice of meditation to many different countries. SIKHISM. It was not until the 1400's that a Hindu in India set out to try to stop conflicts between different religions, as by then Muslims had travelled to India to trade and settle. Guru Nanak became the first of ten leaders of the Sikhs, the last of which introduced turbans and other symbolic dress as they had to defend their peace-teaching religion from persecution, these leaders then being replaced by their holy book the Guru Granth Sahib. The common feature of all three of these religions is the belief in Reincarnation, that we need more than one life to reach perfection to live with God, but each life has consequences for the next.

There is a Christian story of someone dying and arriving in heaven and being taken on a first tour, who enquires why they keep coming across so many walls around groups of people, to which the answer is given, "so they think they are on their own". Is this a realistic picture of the afterlife, lots of different groups kept away from each other because they are all convinced they have the only answers to living the life God approves of? Surely that is to defeat the purpose of living together in the same world? Often religions use "the world", consciously or unconsciously, to mean those we agree with or belong to "us". Perhaps

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God treats the human race as one and it is for our actions as part of that that we are all accountable.

Death has been creeping up on many people lately, as we are facing a global pandemic which is raising questions about sharing vaccines, rich and poor, truth and fake news, freedoms and dictatorship, climate change, fairness, adequate education for young people, national health versus private, racism, migration, will travel return?

As we are asked to pray for Christian Unity and better understanding of World Religions, let us resist the temptation to identify winners and losers but to encourage more sharing and identifying common values and beliefs so that we can successfully live in and truly pray for a diverse world without end. Amen