

THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERFAITH PRAYER

By CHRISTOPHER LAMB

The Open Letter of 1991

FOR SOME YEARS THE ANNUAL Commonwealth Day Observance at Westminster Abbey in England each March has attracted both enthusiasm and criticism. While many Christians were glad to see representatives of Commonwealth nations reading publicly from their own scriptures and joining in common affirmations of solidarity against racial injustice, others were scandalized that one of the most famous shrines of the nation's traditional faith was being used for what they regarded as 'the worship of other gods'. This criticism reached a head with the Open Letter of October 1991 which was first published over some seventy signatures, and which then attracted over 2,000 additional signatures in support. As was intended, most of those who signed were Anglican clergy, in spite of the public opposition to the Letter of the Archbishop of Canterbury and many of the bishops.

What on either side of the controversy was thought to be at stake? The Letter was published in the first year of the Decade of Evangelism, and there is no doubt that many were persuaded to support it by the thought that worshipping together with people of other faiths was an implicit affirmation that there are many valid paths to salvation, and it was not necessary to hear and respond to the Christian gospel in order to be one with God. Christianity, they felt, was being made into just another religion, no better and no worse than any other. In the face of that threat, interfaith worship seemed at best an expression of diluted faith, and at worst handing oneself over to the forces of darkness. In either case it seriously weakened the Decade of Evangelism, and the credibility of those who stood for a vigorous approach to those outside the churches, and the belief that the Christian gospel was addressed to all people, whether or not they already owed allegiance to a community of faith.

For those who were uneasy with the Letter, or downright opposed to it, the issues focused more on the superiority of Christianity and Christian culture which was felt to be implied in the Letter, and the damage which that would do to the fragile trust which had been built up between people of different faiths and the Christian majority. The explicit reference to the Decade of Evangelism in the Letter made many

feel that Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs were intended to be the object of campaigns for their conversion. Others noted the distinction drawn in the letter between religious and social and economic concerns, and criticized the secular assumptions so revealed. It was remarked that few of the original seventy signatories were obviously involved in day-to-day ministry to people of different faiths, and none was regarded as an authority on interfaith affairs or even academic religious studies.

Perhaps the most pertinent criticism of the Letter was that it would have the effect of discouraging contact between Christians and people of different faith, both because the latter would feel slighted by Christian dismissal of their faith as spiritually valueless, and because inexperienced Christians would feel reluctant to get involved with those whose religious activities were apparently so dubious. Christian mission and the Decade of Evangelism was not likely to be promoted by this kind of mutual isolation.

The accusation most resented by signatories to the Letter was the suggestion that it was an implicit promotion of racism, and several were at pains to point out that their record on that score was clean. They did not seem to realize that the explicit disavowal of racist *intent* in the Letter did not of itself prevent racist *effects* being some of its consequences, or that it would be heard in that way by minority communities. Few of the latter would of course have read the Letter, but they quickly knew of it as evidence of widely supported Christian disparagement of their faith, and by implication the whole of their religious-based culture. The distinction between religion and culture was obvious to the signatories of the Letter, but it would have had a very different significance for Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs in Britain. Living in what they identified as a Christian culture they asked themselves what was so superior about Christianity that made Christians object so strongly to the occasional use of other scriptures and prayers in church. Others asked what Christians were afraid of. Rabbi Albert Friedlander, writing in *The Times* (18.12.91), found it

strange that the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury can pray with other religions and maintain the integrity of their faith while these clergymen establish a ghetto of their own surrounded by walls of fear and uncertainty. With due respect, I must point out that an approach to God which is unable to see other religions reaching towards the infinite is a very fearful and weak faith.

Much was made by some sympathizers with the Letter of the position of converts to Christianity from other faiths. The assumption was that

they would be disturbed and resentful at the Church's compromise with the faith of their birth. The feelings of those who had undergone persecution at the hands of their former co-religionists because of their new faith in Christ was clearly uppermost in the minds of the drafters of the Letter. What went unacknowledged was that not all converts experience such persecution, and that among them there is as great a diversity of theological viewpoint about other religious traditions as there is among Christians who have never made any change of religious loyalty.

The anxiety behind the opposition

In personal conversation with signatories to the Letter it became obvious to me that not only had the great majority of them no experience of interfaith prayer, but that their conception of it was dominated by reports of the Commonwealth Day Observance at Westminster Abbey, and a handful of other special occasions at Anglican cathedrals. Few seemed to have any problem with, for example, the idea of praying with Muslim, Sikh or Hindu patients in hospital, or any person of another faith at a time of crisis. In fact *prayer* with people of other faiths seems not to pose the difficulties some find with the idea of interfaith *worship*. The distinction may not seem to hold much water, and it is one that we must come back to. What has become clear is that anxiety levels rise, at least for Anglicans, the more public the occasion is. It is the public interpretation of such events which seems to worry them rather than the substance of the events themselves, and most of all the suggestion that as far as salvation is concerned, Christianity is on a par with other faiths.

The critical factor here is undoubtedly the venue of the occasion. What takes place in other buildings is of less concern than what is permitted in an Anglican church. The Archdeacon of York, an Anglo-Catholic signatory to the Letter, expressed this characteristic concern in a letter to *The Times* (16.12.91):

I would not expect a Jew in his synagogue nor a Muslim in his mosque to allow Christian prayers, for I would not be prepared to ask him to compromise the integrity of his own faith. I want no more than a similar recognition of the integrity of my faith, especially in buildings dedicated to the worship of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. How is this divisive when it does no more than uphold the position of Holy Scripture?

In July 1992 the General Synod of the Church of England debated a report from its Interfaith Consultative Group entitled *Multi-Faith*

Worship?¹ Work on this report had begun a year or two before the Open Letter was released, and the Synod acknowledged the comprehensiveness of its study by overwhelming acceptance of the report and by asking the Church of England's House of Bishops to prepare regulative guidance on the subject. Both the report itself and the response of the Bishops, which was published in January 1993, give heavy weight to the responsibilities of Anglican clergy for what goes on in their churches and cathedrals. The question of the venue of interfaith events is particularly noted. To quote from the *Guidance*² of the House of Bishops:

A critical question is the venue. This will determine who is ultimately in charge of the occasion, what activities are appropriate, what kind of atmosphere is generated by it, and, to a considerable extent, the popular response from those not present at it. For some of other faiths, whatever happens in a Christian building is a Christian occasion, whoever actually participates. It certainly cannot be neutral ground for anybody. (120)³ [p 2].⁴

It is interesting to reflect on the significance of this concern with the physical setting of a religious event. It suggests that what is thought, or rather *felt* to be at stake in interfaith worship is not only the character of the words, music, gestures and silence offered, nor the nature of the One to whom it is offered, but critically the identity of the worshipper. *What does it mean to be Christian?*⁵ becomes the all-important question. Buildings are not merely convenient locations for certain activities, but in the case of churches are planned from the outset to be expressions of Christian identity. They are sermons in stone, especially those churches which for hundreds of years have been the focus of Christian discipleship in the locality. To hold an interfaith service in a Christian church could therefore be equivalent in some minds to loud and aggressive heckling of the preacher during the sermon. At a time when the historic churches in Britain are experiencing serious institutional decline some find it particularly disturbing that religious traditions which are understood to be alien or even antipathetic to the Christian tradition are being welcomed, however infrequently, into the heart of the Church. A member of the House of Lords revealed his distaste for this strange experience (and a penchant for misplaced participles) in another letter to *The Times* (18.12.91). Writing about the Commonwealth Day Observance of 11 March 1991 which took place as usual in Westminster Abbey he said:

Having been offered the privilege of taking part in this ceremony in an Anglican abbey, I believe it showed discourtesy for members of several

faiths to chant their prayers or readings in foreign tongues, which the great majority of the congregation naturally could not follow.

It is perhaps no accident that this issue has surfaced with such vigour in the Church of England. A Church which has always seen itself as the Church of the nation has wrestled for many centuries with the existence of Christian religious minorities, for long attempting either to incorporate or effectively silence them. With the ecumenical movement and a new style of ecclesiastical co-operation, the whole story appears to begin all over again with a new set of religious minorities, this time ones unrelated to Christian tradition. Should they be welcomed into the church building as distant religious relatives (if not quite 'separated brethren'), or courteously reminded of the great theological gulf fixed between Christians and others? And how will the Church of England be regarded, whichever decision it makes?

It is important to remember that the Church of England is still the default mechanism for Christian identity in England. Many of those who have no personal Christian allegiance or habit of worship, but who do not wish to appear or indeed think of themselves as irreligious, claim membership one way or another in the Church of England. Confused or impatient about creed and dogma, they often expect their Church to be hospitable to all forms of religion. Others find this theological vagueness intolerable, and lay all the problems of English and especially Anglican Christianity at the door of compromise with the 'spirit of the age'. It does not help that local and national government officials, the leaders of voluntary societies and educational institutions are all inclined to speak in terms which suggest that the Church of England and its buildings are a convenient focus for all religious aspiration. The following remarks are characteristic of those commonly heard by Anglican clergy:

- 'Some of our children/clients/members are Asian, and we don't want to forget them. Could you include some Indian prayers in the annual service? Yes, Muslim or Sikh or something.'
- 'The new Mayor doesn't describe himself as a religious person but he would like the Civic Service to be an interfaith occasion.'
- 'My daughter is marrying a Hindu, and they wondered if his priest could take part in the service in the parish church.'

An Anglican response to the issue

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the *Guidance* of the Church of England House of Bishops should have concentrated on what the Anglican minister should do when faced with such requests, and that

it is what happens in the parish church which is the focus of their concern. The following quotations convey the sense of enlightened pragmatism they aimed at.

If the event takes place in an Anglican church it has to comply with Canon Law . . . no Anglican minister can simply hand over responsibility for what happens in the worship to someone else. This may mean that certain forms of worship are impossible in an Anglican church. For example the 'serial' form of multi-faith worship in which members of various traditions of faith conduct their own section of the total event would mean that the minister would have no say in the content of that part of the service. (130)

Cathedrals are often the kind of place thought appropriate for such events, yet if a cathedral is used it must be remembered that it 'belongs' not only to Anglicans. Christians of all kinds have an emotional investment in the great national cathedrals, and see them as focus for their own sense of identity as Christians. What happens in them is particularly significant for people in many churches and is likely to cause resentment if it is felt in any way to compromise the Christian faith. Similar things apply to some city centre churches. (119)

For these reasons a neutral venue may be best (122), or in some places it is possible to have a kind of pilgrimage, processing from one place of worship to another, with worship led in each place by the people of that tradition. (131) [p 3f]

It is important to recognise that we are in a new situation which was not envisaged by those who framed our Canon Law. Nevertheless the principle stands that nothing should happen in an Anglican building which is contrary to the Christian faith. (164) There should be no attempt to evade the force of this by describing an event as 'a Celebration', or 'an Observance'. In cases of doubt the bishop should be consulted. Canon B5 says that forms of service authorised by the bishop must be 'reverent and seemly and . . . neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter'.

Practical wisdom suggests that the use of non-religious buildings avoids many of the difficulties which the use of churches may pose. (122) [p 6, 7]

Unresolved issues

The final comment of the Bishops' *Guidance* may indicate a willingness to shift the problem on to someone else's patch, and it is certainly clear that after nearly two years of sustained discussion there is no common mind on the issue of interfaith worship in the Church of England. Part of the difficulty lies in the definition of what is 'worship'. I have deliberately

used the terms 'interfaith worship', 'interfaith prayer', 'multi-faith worship', 'multi-faith service' interchangeably in this article. I might have included 'all faiths' or 'faith to faith' as adjectives, and 'observance', 'celebration', 'ceremony', 'event', 'act of witness' or 'meditation' to describe the occasion concerned. I believe that the profusion of terms reflects the unease of a secular society with any religious expression, just as some Christian bodies (including the authors of the Open Letter) have distinguished between the social life of other faith communities, where co-operation is reckoned possible, and the religious, where it is not.

Yet the great events of life make nonsense of this simple distinction between religious and social (or secular). Is a marriage, or the funeral of a friend a religious occasion or a social one? Lord Justice MacKay was disciplined by his Presbyterian Church for attending the funeral of a Roman Catholic friend on the grounds that his presence as an elder of his church implicated that church in compromise with Roman Catholic doctrine. Few would agree that mere attendance at an event implies approval of all that takes place at it, but the point is that MacKay's debt to his friend, a social debt if you will, involved him necessarily in a religious occasion. Such occasions are bound to multiply in a religiously plural society. The only way to avoid them would be to multiply ghettos. It is simply not possible, even if it were desirable, to draw a firm line between the religious and the social, between faith and culture. We are familiar enough with this situation when 'non-church' friends with no commitment to Christian religious faith respond to our invitations to marriages or baptisms or funerals, or indeed when such people join in singing Christmas carols or choral music such as *The Messiah*. No one supposes that to be a problem, yet it would be rash to assume that the people concerned have no convictions at all about religion. The likelihood is that they believe *other* than the way that Christians believe.

It is exceedingly difficult to guess how the religious future of this country will take shape. It is probable that Christian demands for a distinctive discipline of worship will grow in proportion to the increase in the public profile of other religious options. In itself that should present no problem. No serious believer wants to see other believers simply becoming more casual and unconcerned with the great dimensions of prayer and spirituality. The trick, as always, is to combine that proper Christian distinctiveness with an openness to other religious traditions which does not pretend there are no conflicts of understanding and even of relationship, but which is aware of the continual presence of God in the Other, and the imminent possibility that he will speak through the Other. If this is possible in the process of conversation

– even in the highly ordered conversation called Interfaith Dialogue – should it not also be possible on our knees?

NOTES

¹ *'Multi-Faith Worship?'*, 1992, report by the Interfaith Consultative Group of the General Synod of the Church of England.

² *Guidance*, 1993, response to the above by the House of Bishops of the Church of England.

³ Paragraph references for *'Multi-Faith Worship?'* in round brackets.

⁴ Page references for *Guidance* in square brackets.