

Wednesday April 16th 2008

Centre for the Study of New Religious Movements/INFORM International

Conference, London School of Economics

Opening Address by the Bishop of Norwich

It's a pleasure and a privilege to welcome so many scholars from many parts of the world to this international conference. It's twenty years since INFORM was founded. I can think of no better place for this conference to take place than here under Professor Eileen Barker's watchful eye. I am honoured to be a patron of INFORM. That's probably the reason I'm speaking to you. It may also be useful at a conference when you are considering new religious movements to see a living example of an old religious movement. I am the 71st Bishop of Norwich. I have predecessors going back for the best part of a thousand years. I am an institution as well as a human being. And that can lead to surprises.

A few years ago I was looking through the London telephone directory. I noticed that among the list of London bishops – the Bishop of London, the Bishop of Southwark, the Bishop of Kensington and all the rest, there appeared the Bishop of Norwich. This seemed rather surprising since Norwich is over one hundred miles from London. But then I noticed the word “reservations” against my name. That's how I discovered that I am actually a wine bar in Moorgate. The Bishop of Norwich can be

the name of a wine bar, public house or restaurant as well as a religious leader. That tells you something about the historic interaction of church and society in this country.

Contemporary Britain is a puzzling place as far as religion is concerned. It's often assumed to be a highly secularized society. Yet it has an established church. Bishops of the Church of England sit as members of parliament in the House of Lords, me included. The Queen is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The Church of Scotland is also an established church. It is Presbyterian so has no bishops. Nor does it have parliamentary representation in its own right either at Westminster or in the Scottish Parliament. Wales and Northern Ireland do not have established churches at all. No wonder all this is a puzzle to a foreign visitor. When the Queen goes to Scotland she worships in the Church of Scotland. Supreme Governor of the Church of England she may be. When she's north of the border, she's a Presbyterian.

In this secular society with a couple of established Churches there are also well over a thousand different religious societies and spiritual communities. The number of new religious movements runs well into four figures on the INFORM database. Today's religious variety may be unprecedented but there's been a long history of religious pluralism in Britain. Go back 1700 years and pagan traditions probably co-existed

more happily with Celtic Christianity than we sometimes suppose. A little later Celtic and Roman Christianity lived side by side, sometimes in tension, occasionally in conflict. John Wycliffe and his Lollards incurred the wrath of the medieval Church by promoting reform in the Church and the primacy of scripture. That was a time when religious pluralism was heresy, even treason. Go to Lambeth Palace where the Archbishop of Canterbury still lives and you can see the Lollards prison where those early dissenters were chained to the wall. When the Reformation finally came in the sixteenth century, it took a particular form in England and not simply because of Henry VIII's matrimonial difficulties. European visitors coming to our cathedrals or parish churches often can't tell the difference between Roman Catholicism and the Church of England. Yet this Catholic and Reformed body we call the Church of England contains a great internal variety of Christian traditions. Anglicanism is a sort of experiment in pluralism, one currently being severely tested worldwide.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century encouraged people to read the bible for themselves. It took a while for those in authority to realise this would lead to different interpretations of truth. It took a century or two and a civil war for those who dissented from the religious establishment to be regarded as not necessarily disloyal to the monarch and the state. Meanwhile, many dissenters went to the new world. American religion today would be very different if that hadn't been the case. Here the preaching of John Wesley and the growth of Methodism in the eighteenth

century has often been credited with saving England from a revolution like the one in France. The nineteenth century saw growth and renewal in Christianity but also a small but growing number of people of non-Christian faith coming to England. Recent publicity about the Yemeni Muslims in South Shields in the north of England has caused surprise. They settled there in the 1880s and 1890s. Most British people never knew there were Muslims and mosques here so long ago. In the nineteenth century Jews also began to take an ever greater part in public life. So too, after a struggle, did atheists.

Despite this history of growing religious pluralism, at the beginning of the twenty-first century most people in Britain still consider themselves Christian. The last census in 2001 introduced a question about people's religious affiliation. It had never been done before – at least not since the religious census of 1851 on church attendance. That great Victorian effort led to the discovery that half the nation didn't go to church at all. The result was so shocking it was never attempted again. In 2001, 72% of people in England declared themselves to be Christian when filling in their census forms in the privacy of their own homes. Since somewhere around 7% of the population are in church on any given Sunday it's clear there are a great many people who consider themselves members of the Church of England even if they do not go to church on a regular basis. A recent survey before Easter claimed that 57% of the

population believe that Jesus rose from the dead. I think it's surprising that so many expressed adherence to that most distinctive and challenging of Christian beliefs.

All this illustrates how difficult it is to generalise about what's going on in the religious life of this nation. The dominant theory during the last century was that of secularisation. The late Dr Bryan Wilson of All Souls College, Oxford, who gave the keynote address at INFORM's last international conference, defined secularisation as '*a process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance*'. This seems undeniable but insufficient. Even the question of social significance is unclear. Religious institutions possess less power in contemporary British society but so do all institutions relying on committed mass membership and shared social mores. Political parties and trade unions have probably suffered a greater eclipse.

Callum Brown's book *The Death of Christian Britain* took issue with the secularisation theorists who reckoned that the long withdrawing tide of the sea of faith was gradual. Instead Brown argued that there was a massive cultural revolution in the 1960s which dethroned Christianity in Britain. It was sudden and unprecedented with implications still to be worked out. It was partly the result of the liberation of women who had been the carriers and bearers of religion to the next generation in their loyalties and child-rearing. The Pill did for God.

It's certainly true that over the past forty or fifty years there's been a massive change in Britain, and in its religious make-up. There's been a flow of immigrants bringing religious traditions long associated with their countries of origin but new to these islands – from India, Japan, Vietnam, China, South America and Africa and other places too. This has led to Britain being described as a multi-faith society, even if the numbers recorded in the last census were still overwhelmingly Christian. Within Christianity itself much more committed and sectarian sub-groups have emerged in many of the mainstream churches while new minority churches have been formed. The hope that all the different churches would come together into one great new united Church of Christ – a hope that was powerful in the first half of the twentieth century – hasn't come to pass. Indeed, Christianity seems more fragmented than ever.

There's also been a growth in what's often called new age spirituality. Here the desire is for the inclusion of varied spiritual experience. It's often unformed and little organized but contains networks of individuals who recognize the God within, nurture human creativity, practice complementary medicine and are content with a spirituality which is a doctrine free zone.

We have to add to this mix a host of new religious movements of recent origin. The Unification Church, Hare Krishna, Scientology, various forms of Buddhism, the Falun

Gong movement - these and others have found their place alongside earlier Christian deviations such as the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons who have grown numerically if intermittently, over more than a century. Alongside that, Britain has spawned its own indigenous new religious movements – the Findhorn Community; the Jesus Army; the Aetherius Society or, one of my favourites that's quite old now, the Panacea Society. The box of Joanna Southcott's sealed writings apparently contains the answer to the world's problems. It needs twenty-four bishops of the Church of England to gather together to open it. The Panacea Society seems to have more faith in the spiritual power of bishops than the General Synod of the Church of England.

This lightening tour of the British religious scene would not be complete without mentioning a new and aggressive atheism, epitomised by the writings of Richard Dawkins, but not simply confined to him. This new atheism frequently sees science as implacably opposed to the religious mindset which it regards as irrational and corrupting. Religious belief in any form is dismissed as not worthy of study although it sometimes admitted that the religious impulse has produced some quite remarkable architecture, music and art. One wonders whether this reinvigorated atheism is partly a consequence of the bewildering variety of forms of religious belief, faith and practice which face us in the modern world.

So what can be the place of the Church of England when there is such a smorgasbord of religions, beliefs, non-beliefs and spiritualities in contemporary Britain? Most Anglicans in the world get along without establishment. But does it have a use here? Can the Church of England redefine establishment in a different and more inclusive way?

It was the poet T S Eliot, a churchwarden in this city for many years when he was writing his best poetry, who once said *'the Church of England always washes its dirty linen in public – but at least it gets washed'*. Our internal debates in England still make national news. The ordination of women, homosexuality or the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent lecture on Sharia Law – all generate plenty of media coverage. How the Church of England deals with divisive issues is intriguing. It's now fourteen years since the first women were ordained as priests in the Church of England. The change has not proved as divisive as some people imagined. But provision was made within the Church of England for priests and lay people who dissented from that change. The details need not concern us but accommodation was made within the Church for dissent. It's difficult to do this, but I believe it is a witness to a world in which people so quickly divide from one another and even demonise each other not just in a religious context but politically, economically and socially as well. It was not always thus in the Church of England but I think we've learned from some past mistakes.

Perhaps this is why there seems so little desire among other believers for the Church of England to be disestablished. One of the most able defenders of the establishment of the Church of England is the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks. Intriguingly he went to a Church of England primary school. What he recognizes is that an established church witnesses both to the public face of religious faith and the active participation of believers in civil society. The temptation to marginalise religion to a private leisure activity for consenting adults is a powerful one. It needs resisting.

An established church should not seek simply to protect the beliefs and practices of its own followers. It should seek to be of service to the wider community and an interpreter to a secular society of other religious traditions. That's what the Archbishop of Canterbury was attempting to do in his controversial speech about Islamic law. The Church of England has played a significant part in widening chaplaincy in our prisons, hospitals, universities and other institutions to include Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and those of other traditions so that they may offer a pastoral ministry to their own followers. Chaplaincy belongs within the tradition of pastoral ministry cherished in Christianity. But it has a value which has been more widely shared. And all this adds to the capacity to include and integrate.

However, many new religious movements fall well outside what I've been describing. That's sometimes because they see themselves as communities who spurn wider associations. But it's often because they are deliberately ignored, marginalised, ridiculed or consciously excluded even by those who consider themselves of a liberal and inclusive frame of mind. New religious movements are frequently the victims of fear and inaccurate projections. Those of us within the mainstream churches know something of this for ourselves. Bishops are well aware what it is to have other people project on to them their own hatred of the church or misunderstanding of what it believes.

That's why the work of so many scholars at this conference in this area is so important. We need accurate information. We need analysis. We need to comprehend the movements of faith and belief that are found in our society. Some of them we may find personally very disturbing. Many of them we will think simply untrue. But it is more dangerous for the health of society to ignore and exclude them or seek to control and suppress them than it is to understand and comprehend them.

That's why it's a privilege for me to be with you. That's why I am so glad to be associated with INFORM and why I honour Professor Eileen Barker and her colleagues so highly. INFORM was a courageous initiative and it has taken great tenacity on Eileen's part to enable it to do its work over two decades. I never use the

word ‘courageous’ without thinking of a once popular television comedy series in this country called *Yes Minister*. It portrayed the relationship between a cabinet minister, Jim Hacker, and his senior civil servants. Jim Hacker eventually became the Prime Minister and Sir Humphrey Appleby his cabinet secretary. Whenever Sir Humphrey wanted to put the Prime Minister off some proposed course of action he simply had to describe it as ‘*courageous*’. That put the frighteners on and did the trick.

INFORM was a courageous initiative because it was – and is – easily misunderstood. Its accurate recording of new religious movements of all kinds on its data base and its research and contacts leads some to think it is some sort of apologist for them. Those who have a mission to rescue people from what they believe to be undesirable cults feel that INFORM is either too sympathetic or too detached. But there are many families who have been grateful for the information about the religion their loved one has adopted, discovering sometimes that their worst fears are not necessarily well founded. And INFORM’s advice to stay in touch and keep contact, no matter how peculiar and distressing you find this new religious movement, has frequently been life saving.

I know that you know this and I know that you look forward to three exciting days in which you will exchange ideas and information about all sorts of religious movements. You will even experience a medieval banquet. You gather in this great

metropolis at the heart of a country with a long religious history and with a kaleidoscope of faiths and beliefs unthinkable only a few decades ago. What was once unthinkable now needs a huge amount of thinking through and I pay tribute to you all for doing just that. If a bishop from an old religious movement which he believes to be ever new in Jesus Christ is allowed to do such a thing in this gathering, I pray God's blessing upon you all.