



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

From Faith to Inter-Faith: A Personal Account

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Faith: Early Stirrings of God

I am a cradle Anglican. No doubt I am not alone in this gathering brought up on the BCP. I disliked Sunday School and couldn't wait till I was confirmed and could attend Sunday morning Holy Communion. So, from the age of 12 on Sundays, usually with my parents but increasingly alone, my earliest stirrings of the divine consisted of a diet of hymns from Ancient and Modern, sermons of varying value, sacramental bread and wine, and of course singing the Nicene Creed as one does. It works better sung I feel. I look back on this early years as the beginnings of a somewhat pious young life, obedient, respectful, serious and conscientious in my religion.

It was only in my 40s that I discovered that my heritage had roots in Primitive Methodism on my mother's side via my maternal grandfather; the youngest of 8 or so children of Primitive Methodist stock. When he married he became a member of the Church of England and his only child, my mother passed on her faith to me. But it's helpful to remember that you can take the boy out of Primitive Methodism but you can't take Primitive Methodism out of the boy and he duly passed it on to my mother and being the eldest son I received it in large doses. The result was a very moral and serious spiritual life. It also explained quite a bit about my later struggles to find an authentic and earthy spiritual and emotional life that felt real and liberating. If Primitive Methodism was on my mother's side on my father's side loomed the world of Scottish Presbyterianism. My father became a member of the Church of England when he married but the influence of the moralism and the ambiguities for living that this puritan ethos bequeaths have a lasting effect. I think my father inwardly rebelled except when it came to bringing up three sons!

These spiritual streams flowed into the middle-of-the-road sacramental and society orientated Anglicanism of my childhood. I came to value the different threads in my own spiritual life. However, I also came to recognise that my inherited spiritual traditions could quite easily fall prey to an incipient moralism which only endorsed and encouraged the body/soul split. My journey has been a long road of re-integration of body, mind and spirit. Our spiritual lives are an interesting weave of many streams flowing into the river of our own life. The headwaters of religious stirrings gather momentum. And as our life winds its way we have to figure out as best we can the shape and structure of our own particular form of spiritual existence. It's a life project and in my 7th decade I realise I remain a work in progress. How goes your own work in progress?

From those early religious roots in a country coal mining town in the Hunter Valley I had a strong structure *for* faith but I didn't know whether it was sufficient *to live a faithful life*. What I lacked was the very thing that was the secret of the early 18th century Methodism of Wesley; the 'heart strangely warmed' by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And it was precisely this, but in the form of a most intimate and empowering illumination of mind and heart that I encountered in a

period of deep emotional and spiritual crisis in my early 20s. I felt as if I had finally walked out of a dark forest onto the top of a mountain where the light shone and radiated its light and heat. And finally, I could offer a praise to God.

I simply report that with the passing of years this sense that within the expanding cosmos and the 6 billion people that inhabit this tiny planet it remains something far too great and unfathomable to me that there is a God who is closer than breath itself, who searches the hearts, who evokes faith, hope and love from within the fragile and foolish lives of human beings. Frankly it's just too much for me. But I won't let go; why? Because at the bottom of the well are the everlasting arms of God that won't let go of us; of this world. It is true we walk by faith and not by sight. And this walk of faith is a kind of following of another; of following one who has walked that pilgrim way before and is always beckoning us from beyond to keep going. I speak of Jesus Christ. Here is the preeminent story of God with us and God for us. And we are a part of this story. We are baptised into this story – being drowned; buried; and raised; being fed by word, bread and wine; symbols of the life of God given for us; given to us; given for the life of the world. God up close and personal. Jesus says I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.

Needless to say, I couldn't leave this stuff of mystery and get on with life. I was deeply mired in it and so I wanted to serve the living God and the natural place for me was in the Anglican Church and so began a life in Holy Orders now in its 38th year. And my insatiable appetite for understanding the stuff of faith meant that the ancient discipline, the once upon a time Queen of the Sciences, theology, became my mind's passion. Recently I had a conversation with a young doctoral candidate in theology. I described myself as a kind of theological engineer. I want to know how the engine works; others can examine the wheels, the dashboard, the comfort of the seats, the design of the shell. I have my head in the engine. A theological mechanic of sorts for the past 3 decades. What could be less attractive to a secular world that has long jettisoned any notion of a God up close and personal; of a world in which ignorance and prejudice trump common sense and practical wisdom. Why would you spend even a nanno-second with your head in the engine of a car that doesn't exist? I always recall the recommendation of the great English writer, poet, philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge whose response to the doubter and disparager of the divine was quite simple and to the point: try it. Usually it is pride that stops us.

My own spiritual pilgrimage has taken many twists and turns over the past 45 years. Times of immense personal struggle and darkness only relieved by the company of others who have cared for me and not given up. It has been a journey which is like my eyes being opened more and more to see, to understand and experience the ways of God in my life and my ways of living with others. I am more and more convinced of the truth of the words of Martin Luther – the 16th Century Reformer whose 500th anniversary of his famous 95 theses we remembered last year – 'we are all

in the same swamp'. So, let's not get ahead of ourselves; rather let's practice placing our footsteps in the one whom we follow.

Through these years I have discovered the gifts of the other churches that make up the body of Christ; of the Roman Catholic Church through a nun in my first parish who was a skilled supervisor; of the evangelical, Anglo-Catholic and charismatic streams in my own Anglican Church; of the Lutheran tradition – our youngest daughter's godmother was a Lutheran pastor until she died. My first teaching position was in the Uniting Church seminary. I was naturally predisposed to the ecumenical way in Christianity and this of course is at the heart of Anglicanism. Throughout this period, I have become only too aware of the immense challenges that face leaders of the Church and of what it means to be a bishop and teacher of the faith. I have discovered that the Anglican household of faith is broad, rich and interesting; pockets are dying, other areas are sprouting. We need faith and courage to see what new things the Spirit of God is calling us to. For me a new phase began in earnest in 2013 at age 61 – always a late developer!

2. Faith Meets Faith: The Journey of Inter-Faith

I remember seeing the film 'Of gods and men', in 2011 at *Greenbelt*, a Christian festival held annually at Cheltenham, UK. The film told the story of the monks of Tibhirine, rural village of Algeria. On the night of 26–27 March 1996, seven monks from the Atlas Abbey of Tibhirine, near Medea in Algeria, belonging to the Roman Catholic Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (known as Trappists) were kidnapped during the Algerian Civil War. They were held for two months, and found dead in late May 1996. The circumstances of their kidnapping and death remain controversial; the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA) claimed responsibility for both, but in 2009, retired General François Buchwalter reported that the monks were accidentally killed by the Algerian army in a botched attempt to free the kidnapped monks.

The life of the monks of Tibhirine are a reminder to us of the capacity of human beings to so enter into the lives of others of a different faith – in this case village Muslims - that we are simultaneously drawn deeper into what the Prior of the Tibhirine monks, Christian de Chergé, referred to as the 'paschal light'. I was deeply moved at the simplicity of their communal lives, their immersion in the host culture, the final Christmas Eve Eucharist (joyful, gentle and haunting); their life under the shadow of the cross, their kidnapping and gruesome end (which we left to imagine in the film).

That was 2011. Three months later I was back in the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, priest in charge of a local parish. 20 months later I was appointed as Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. And over the course of my first two years we thought long and hard about the purpose and focus for the life and programs of the Centre. And one of the four pillars we named 'Peace through new religious engagements'. In the first month I was contacted by

the chair of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change. That began a fascinating journey with colleagues and leaders from other religious traditions who were concerned about this planet and what was happening to it.

About the same time I was visited by one of the organisers of the ACT Refugee Action Committee. Would we join with them. They were non-religious, apolitical group from many walks of life. The ACC&C hosted a meeting attended by over 350 people. The evening was billed, *Refugees, what would Jesus Do*. Out of that gathering was born the *Faith Based Working Group on Refugees*. It's still going strong and Christians are giving a powerful lead and witness among the religious traditions involved.

Within a few short months of being at the ACC&C I met Fethullah, the Executive Director of *Bluestar Intercultural Centre* in Canberra. Thus began my engagement with Islam in a new way. In 2015, we held a major national dialogue between Christianity and Islam which took us to six cities in two weeks asking the question in the public space, 'Can Christianity and Islam Co-Exist?' It was a true dialogue between a leading public intellectual from Indonesia (Professor Azymuradi Azra) and my predecessor at the ACC&C, Professor James Haire. Large gatherings eves-dropped on a conversation between, in Christian de Chergé's phrase 'pilgrims of the horizon' and in the process, I am confident many were drawn towards that horizon. This was followed up by a visit from Professor Mona Siddiqui from Edinburgh; a remarkable Muslim scholar who has written some memorable books on Jesus, Mohammed and hospitality.

A few years ago, we decided to revitalise the Friends of the Centre. But before we went public I had a call from Hayat. At a function, he met the local Anglican priest and expressed a desire to get involved in community work. The priest suggested he ring me. Next thing Hayat, his wife and older daughter are in my office asking what can they do to support the work of the Centre. I said you can join the Friends of the Centre. Hayat was a former top-ranking diplomat from Pakistan. Our first three friends were Muslims.

I inherited from my predecessor the annual co-hosting of an Iftar meal during the season of Ramadan. At the heart of Christianity and Islam is hospitality. And what a privilege to be invited to the home of Muslim friends and families to celebrate Ramadan. Last year we were not only invited to the evening meal at which the fast was broken; we were also invited to the 4.30am breakfast before the fast began. That takes some discipline. And how remarkable is a simple act of hospitality. So, for a number of Christmases our Muslim friends have joined us for Christmas day. Our holy days are shared with sacred meals and much joy. Such occasions don't solve the great problems of the world; but they do show that we must begin the task of peace and harmony at the local level; a movement from the common table to the common good.

I also inherited the Commonwealth Day Multi-Faith Celebration which has been a feature of the ACC&C for many years. Successive Governor Generals of Australia have attended. We hear from our friends from all religious traditions share their scriptures and traditions of wisdom. Friendships are made across religious and cultural divides.

This year we will hold our third Order of Australia ACT Branch annual multi-faith Observance.

Perhaps one of the most unforgettable occasions in 2017 was the inaugural Torah Completion Ceremony at Parliament House in October. The event was hosted by five Jewish members of parliament, Rabbi Shmueli Feldman and the Jewish Community. The Torah was handwritten by a quill on parchment and has taken about a year to complete. It is the first Torah to be completed in Parliament House and the first to be owned by the Canberra Synagogue. It was sight to behold to see rabbis and Jewish MPs dancing in the midst of the gathering.

And for many years the national body, Religions for Peace has met at the ACC&C.

Perhaps some of the most memorable interfaith events have occurred in relation to significant events in the world. When the MH17 airliner disappeared in 2014 we held an interfaith service of Lament. I still remember the ballet dancer who danced an interpretation of a song of lament for the victims.

In some places in the world religious minorities are persecuted. Such is the case of the Bahai in Iran. We held a event entitled Beyond Prejudice which drew attention to the plight of religious minorities and persecution. It raises a question for Christians in Australia. I believe those of the major religious tradition have a special responsibility to defend the rights of religious minorities; a sign of justice and hospitality.

In my role, I have discovered a vast network of people, leaders, scholars and interested people from all religious traditions seeking the common good; offering the wisdom of their traditions and working behind the scenes to build a better society. This kind of activity doesn't sell newspapers, nor attract much attention by social media. But I liken it to the leaven in the lump; it helps us to rise above our ignorance and prejudice and become seekers of a greater truth that holds us all. And I am on this journey as a follower of Christ.

This year during Ramadan our Centre will join with Bluestar Intercultural Centre and the Australian Catholic University to host an Iftar Dinner, entitled 'The Art of Living Together'. This Ramadan dinner coincides with the Islamic Art exhibition at the National Museum of Australia entitled 'So That You Might Know Each Other'. The Iftar dinner reaffirms our bonds of affinity with each other.

Invitations will be extended to the community leaders, parliamentarians, media personalities, senior public servants, academics and defence force members.

Earlier this year to coincide with harmony day we jointly hosted with Bluestar Intercultural Centre a screening of the film *The Sultan and The Saint*. The documentary is about Muslim-Christian peace and tells one of the great, lost stories from history. It is the story of Francis of Assisi and the Sultan of Egypt, and their meeting on a bloody battlefield during the period of Christian-Muslim conflict known as the Crusades.

Finally, I make mention of the film which was the Inaugural winner of the Centre's national Religious Short Film Prize. The title *The Forgotten Tree* combines elements of Judaism, Islam and Christianity in war-torn strife. The film is a story about a chance encounter between a young Jewish woman and a Palestinian child in time of war. It takes place in a dilapidated Christian church. With such elements and many issues of belief, ancient hatreds and violence are at play.

Back to the monks of Tibhirine. Christian de Chergé and his community of monks explored what it is to 'walk together' with Muslims 'in the house of Islam' as a minority faith. Christian de Chergé opines 'For thirty years I have carried within myself the existence of Islam as a nagging question. I have immense curiosity regarding the place it holds in God's mysterious design'. He said we are pilgrims of the horizon. This phrase sets the framework and trajectory for the Tibhirine monks. It is a reminder that there is much more beyond what can be known that calls both Christian and Muslim towards the future. This requires a 'humility of the intelligence' that recognizes that we are a mystery to ourselves. The appeal to a horizon is also a sign of an open hopeful future that is met by 'paschal light'. Finally, this hopeful horizon is shaped by humility grounded in God's humility (the obedience of the Son to the Father). Christian de Chergé comes to a daring conclusion, 'Christ is the only [possible] Muslim'; only in the Son is there a perfect submission to the will of God.

Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindu's and other religious traditions have much in common; minimally they represent a vast number of human beings who have not given up on the spiritual quest and the question of truth. Sure, there are differences as you would expect but it is only in conversation and through hospitality that we come to truly understand who we are together in our differences. But the horizon of our life together and the common challenges we face draw us inevitably together in a society that is increasingly unsympathetic to the values of the religious traditions. But religions are here to stay. The secular will eventually give way to the post secular; the powerful religious traditions will re-emerge as leaven in the lump to bring some needed compassion and care in a competitive, fractious and divided world. Somehow through our common life together we have to find a way beyond the *homo economicus* – I consume therefore I am; to *homo religious* – I worship therefore I belong.

That being the case there is a great work awaiting those who care for the future of our society and planet. In the first instance Christians are called to a renewed 'existential dialogue' with those of other religious traditions. And that requires self-abasement and humility. It means practicing a 'hospitality without boundaries'. It takes place most often and most effectively in ordinary business of life. This of course leads us into a delicate and important area of prayer with the other. For the monks of Tibhirine, this entailed a journey from 'being together for prayer' with their Muslim friends to 'praying together'; a controversial and delicate matter to be sure. Not surprisingly for Christian de Chergé monastic culture offered the optimal conditions for interreligious dialogue; 'best placed to help Islam understand what the Church's deepest instinct is'. There were parallels between the pillars of Islam and monastic practices.

Conclusion

I have spoken briefly of my own journey of faith and how it has been broadened in recent years in the world of other faiths. But what of the question of faith for others? Whence comes the first stirrings of God? For many the journey into Christian faith is simply the story of their family history. Born and bred in the church. Faith comes naturally but it can become mechanical and the passion and energy of faith can vanish. For others, the journey into faith is a struggle, often crippled with doubt, hard won, sometimes tumultuous. For increasing numbers of the younger generation, the journey to faith seems pointless and irrelevant. What good has it brought anyone. These same people remain spiritually hungry; but where to find the spiritual protein; that's the question. They desperately want something to believe in. So, the faith question; the God question; it's not going away. It's simply migrating into other things. What to give one's life to? In a highly individualist age transcendence has given way to self-interest with minimal reference beyond the world of the self. Jesus' words ring out: 'seek and you shall find'. If the reality of God takes root in your life or by the scruff of the neck; if the reality of a God up close and personal grabs you and won't let you go; if faith becomes a living reality; then you've found the 'pearl of great price', the treasure hid in a field; the secret of the kingdom of God.

But what about those you meet who bear witness to a different faith? What are we to make of such fellow travellers; those seekers of truth who still refuse the enticements of power, wealth, status etc; who seek a higher devotion appropriate to human beings made in the image of God. There are some great commonalities here despite significant differences. And it takes courage and curiosity to discover the lives and spiritual secrets of those of other faiths. My own journey from faith to interfaith has taken many turns in recent years. I have many unanswered questions and an acknowledged stubborn commitment to singing the Nicene Creed – or at least confessing this faith in worship. To move from faith to inter-faith does not mean selling your soul; rather it is a journey of enrichment, friendship and empowerment. I liken it to the famous story of the Emmaus Road in

Luke's Gospel. Not the journey to Emmaus; nor the journey back to Jerusalem. No, I'm talking about the third journey of the heart from Jerusalem in the footsteps of Christ, under the guidance and comfort of the Spirit, into the highways and byways of life. Here is where we meet fellow travellers, many of whom know no God but many of a different faith with whom we find a natural resonance as seekers of the one true God. We dare to join such seekers with eyes fixed on the coming kingdom of God; feet firmly planted in the stuff of this life; and a deep desire to work for the repair and renewal of our common life.