

SERVICE RELATING TO THE LONGHILL SURVEY

This service is about a survey of religion and people in Longhill that Peter Forster and I have been doing. It was commissioned by the Church of England for an experimental mission project in parallel with its thinking that led to Faith in the City. Rather than simply me tell you about it I will use the service to draw out a religious theme which the survey and contact with the Longhill church has presented to me.

I am going to begin with some figures to give you all an idea of what we found in terms of the common belief of the estate from replies of over 200 out of a sample of 400 people in a population of around 5000.

We found an even split between those who considered themselves religious and those who did not, about 45% each way. But about two thirds believed in the existence of God, and 40% of everyone believed God is able to listen to prayers, with less than 20% taking the view that God means a depth to life. Less than 20% are atheist and agnostic. More people pray to God than think he can hear them, that's over 50%. Now one of the most interesting figures is that nearly 50% regard Jesus to be the only son of God. In this supposed religionless age that was high, and only a quarter thought he was a good man and one tenth a leader of a faith like others. Again orthodoxy looks strong with a third thinking that the Bible was inspired by God, nearly one third taking the

human option and one sixth taking the fundamentalist option. Then we got some clues to these figures, well over half thinking children should be told Christianity is true but less than a third thinking it is the truest for themselves. More people disbelieve in life after death than do so, which means that one quarter of those who believe Jesus is the son of God could not believe in his resurrection, a principal component of actual orthodoxy. We also found from a quarter to one eighth of people believing in a range of superstitions, which is interesting.

So there is an identification with orthodox Christian beliefs, except that they do not always connect properly, and then there is one other matter. Church attendance is minimal, and our figures over emphasise the attendance (as everything else religious). We found that whereas almost everyone is christened and three quarters describe themselves nominally as Church of England, only one fifth are members and on our very optimistic figures only one fifth are prepared to go to church even at the best of times. Well we know that out of the 5000 of the estate only 30 go weekly to the local church and few go outside the estate to others.

So, what sort of faith is this? The main body of the service is designed to offer some answers and look at the relationship between it and the faith of the mainstream. The sermon takes the matter further and considers the divisions between the different approaches to faith which exist.

One element of religion of particularly a number of woman is fortune. So with that in mind we sing our first hymn, hymn number 74, There but For Fortune. I checked out the tune at Swine last Sunday and it's a bit difficult but its the only one like that.

H y m n

The figures you might have found surprising. So how come faith is so outwardly orthodox? The answer is indicated in the first reading. Edward Bailey, an Anglican priest who did a Ph.D in the subject of popular religion and set up The Network for Implicit Religion, suggests that people do not primarily believe in God, Jesus or the Church but in 'Christianity' which is a popularised version of the apostolic religion. He points out that the structure of belief is not that of Christianity but Hinduism. Christ is the cultural figure equitable with Krishna in Hinduism. This is from some writing of his:

Mention of the self as the ultimate manifestation of sacredness within 'Christianity's' universe may sound more like a form of Hinduism than Christianity, at least as the Church has conceived it. ...Certainly there is a great gulf between the faith of the people, and the official, if not conventional, faith of the Church.

...Clearly this is one kind of Christianity; as village Hinduism is one kind of Hinduism; and as ecclesiastical Christianity and philosophical Hinduism are other kinds. (Bailey in Moss, pp. 186-7)

Well, popular belief, with the faded memory of the narrower faith, does not share the breadth of the all embracing faith which is Hinduism. However, there are some interesting parallels between it and the structure of Hinduism. The historical nature of Christianity as a saving redeeming faith is turned into a faith of the round of life, for growing up and for the moments of significance. That is why the rites of passage remain the main basis of contact between the people and the churches.

So Jesus as the Son of God is like the cultural Krishna: a habit of speech, a correct title. This feeling was reported during the survey itself. If this feeling is true then it supports the Hinduism theory.

This reading is from Chapter 11 of The Bhagavad Gita which is the book of the dialogue between the imaginary characters Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna is a warrior forced to combat his kinsmen in a family war; Krishna is disguised as a charioteer who takes Arjuna between the two armies and tells of the plurality of things underlied by the one reality, Brahman. In fact the war is the spiritual battle we all have, Arjuna is the seeker and Krishna is the manifestation of God.

ARJUNA: Out of compassion you have taught me the supreme mystery of the Self. Through your words my delusion is gone. You have explained the origin and end of every creature, O lotus-eyed one, and told me of your own supreme limitless existence.

Just as you have described your infinite glory, O Lord, now I long to see it. I want to see you as the supreme ruler of creation. O Lord,

master of yoga, if you think me strong enough to behold it, show me your immortal Self.

SRI KRISHNA: Behold, Arjuna, a million divine forms, with an infinite variety of colour and shape. Behold the gods of the natural world, and many more wonders never revealed before. Behold the entire cosmos turning within my body, and the other things you desire to see.

But these things cannot be seen with your physical eyes; therefore I give you spiritual vision to perceive my majestic power.

SANJAYA [the narrator]: Having spoken these words, Krishna, the master of yoga, revealed to Arjuna his most exalted, lordly form.

He appeared with an infinite number of faces, ornamented by heavenly jewels, displaying unending miracles and the countless weapons of his power. Clothed in celestial garments and covered with garlands, sweet smelling with heavenly fragrances, he showed himself as the infinite Lord, the source of all wonders whose face is everywhere.

If a thousand sons were to rise in the heavens at the same time, the blaze of their light would resemble the splendour of that supreme spirit.

There, within the body of the God of gods, Arjuna saw all the manifold forms of the universe united as one. Filled with amazement, his hair standing on end in ecstasy, he bowed before the Lord with joined palms and spoke these words.

ARJUNA: O Lord, I see within your body all the gods and every kind of living creature. I see Brahma, the Creator, seated on a lotus; I see the ancient sages and the celestial serpents.

I see infinite mouths and arms, stomachs and eyes, and you are embodied in every form. I see you everywhere, without beginning, middle, or end. You are the Lord of all creation, and the cosmos is your body.

In this mythology the God of gods shows his face. Jesus in this country is not so much a physical human being but a myth from childhood. He is not as such a spirit being, but he is someone of cultural significance. He then becomes a part of the religion of the round of life rather than of straight revelation as in

orthodoxy. One aspect of this is the prayer that just about everyone learns, the Lord's Prayer, which we sing now.

Lord's Prayer

As I continue on would you please turn to Words of Worship at Number 203 and be prepared to turn to number 209. I will arrive at these very shortly.

So faith is about the round of life and this only requires occasional contact with organised religion. Our figures indicate that people indeed do use the churches for their purposes and according to their style of religion. Orthodoxy is a salvation faith and requires continued public worship, but the kind of faith we identify is based more on the family and its needs and aspirations.

This reading from Kenneth L. Patten is simple and indicates the sentiment behind popular faith and the practice of baptism. It is number 203 in Words of Worship

When one baby is born it is the symbol of all birth and life, and therefore all people must rejoice and smile, and all people must lose their hearts to a child.

I invite the congregation to take part in the following worship. Please turn to Words of Worship at No. 209, Families are for Learning

The congregation are asked to respond where the italics exist.

Families are for learning joy; the joy of young voices in laughter; the joy of first questions and the searching for answers;

The joy of bedtime stories and adventures in the woods in the spring, when green new life, pushing through the dead leaves, teaches hope.

Families are for learning the give and take of sharing things, like bikes and ties and party dresses and also chores and feelings.

Families are for building attitudes so necessary for living together in the community.

Families are for learning how to meet and know sorrow and tragedy; and for bearing the loneliness of long separations, the hardships, the disappointments, and the anxieties and fears that time and distance make so real.

Families are for holidays and holy days, for birthdays and anniversaries.

But most of all families are for everyday; so that young people growing up can learn what it is to belong to something; from which, if they give of themselves, they can learn more than they will ever need.

People belong to families and do not belong to churches. Yet so few attending church regularly was not the case in the nineteenth century. Like in the United States today nearly 50% of the population were churchgoers whereas now in Britain a comparable figure is just 10%. Well, city living and industrialisation killed off the roots of many rural folk beliefs and gave Christianity a free run; secondly as affluence grew Christianity became a place of leisure and an outlet for moral philanthropic work by the middle class. This basis of popular churchgoing, carried out in a spirit of hopefulness, was ended by the welfare state and by the further affluence that allowed alternative means of leisure.

British society, unlike American society is private and reserved, and the experience of hopelessness from the First World War in this country killed the spirit of optimism on which churches had been based. Subsequently churchgoing declined.

So this next hymn is about both the round of life and the folly of war. Things have this habit of going around in circles. We sing hymn number 83, Where Have All The Flowers Gone? and think of the way, as suggested in the cultural religion observed, that life goes round and around.

H y m n

This leaves the Church, the organised religion available to most people, cut off in terms of regular contact and activity. But back in better days the theologies affected and broke down the churches into the various denominations. Lutheranism broke away from Roman Catholicism, Calvinism paralleled the power of the Roman Catholic system of authority, and there was the anti-infant baptism theology. These were three basic European developments which found their way into Britain' s own particular long-running Reformation. We Unitarians too are a part of this sad history. This has all been done in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. As I will be suggesting this tendency to schism has by no means stopped within the British situation of

almost ignored churches. Gandhi had a view on this tendency towards schism:

Let Gandhism be destroyed if it stands for error. Truth and ahimsa [that is the desire for non-violence] will never be destroyed, but if Gandhism is another name for sectarianism, it deserves to be destroyed. If I were to know, after my death, that what I stood for had degenerated into sectarianism, I should be deeply pained. We have to work away silently. Let no one say he is a follower of Gandhi. It is enough that I should be my own follower. I know what an inadequate follower I am of myself, for I cannot live up to the convictions I stand for. (Attenborough, R., 1982, p. 106.)

We sing the hymn number 56, Dear Lord and Father of Mankind which includes the line: "forgive our foolish ways".

H y m n

SERMON

In doing the survey report of Longhill we have had to refer to the relationship between religious belief on the estate and that of the local church. In my address now I will refer to a religious issue that this throws up.

It seems to me that there are three kinds of Christianity. The first is the religion of doctrine. Now, this can be moderate or fundamentalist. The second way is the way according to what you might have heard as a child: sugary stories, nice words and images for growing up. This is the way of the family

Bible, the book which sits on the bookshelf in most homes and is almost never read. It is the faith of Christenings, weddings, funerals, horoscopes or whatever. The third way is the extraction of the truths in the religion which relates to genuine experience and turns reality on its head in order to pronounce a central message for living. This you get in the New and the Old Testament and in the teachings of Jesus. So there is the faith of doctrine and narrow revelation as institutionalised in the mainstream Church, there is the faith of childhood upbringing and the God who tends to be the nice Englishman, and there is the faith of the story and genuine experience which challenges.

The dominance of the first type of faith in the institutions of Christianity have led to the religion being riddled by division. The desire to have dogmatic certainty has been completely self-destructive. The second type of faith has developed to relate to the daily, seasonal and life-long realities of living as they are faced. In the struggle and dualism between doctrine and folk religion the prophetic type of faith can easily be lost.

The first problem of the organised Christianity is the chasm that has developed between it and the faith of the people. Christianity just fills in the structure of folk religion with some titles like Son of God, God, and the Church, but the meaning of these details is changed. This faith is circular because it is about the round of life. In contrast, the faith of the mainstream is

linear: it is about revelation in history. We are not going round and around. According to it we have seen the highest in the resurrection of Christ and we are going towards the ultimate Kingdom of God, the vision in the future and at the end of time.... So, theologically speaking, the Church is being cut off from the people. We see this, for example, when we look at the conflict over those vicars who do not want to baptise children indiscriminately. Their understanding of the act conflicts with the understanding of ordinary people.

It has always been like this of course. Britain' s religious heritage is as much circular as linear. Our pagan roots were circular. But the difference has been that there always was a competition and even a synthesis between the rural round of life and the Church with its eschatological message. The difference now is that the population are cut off from the liturgies of the Church and are out of contact with linear Christianity. The brief success of Christianity in the second half of the nineteenth century could not last.

I think the idea of secularisation is wrong. I think people will always be religious. What I am not sure about, with the people cut off from the liturgies of Christianity, is how long Christianity can continue to provide the details to this Hindu-like structure of faith.

Well, not only is the mainstream Church cut off from the population in this contrast between the linear faith and the circular faith, but it also is dividing

and specialising within the mainstream. This is its second problem. All branches, whether liberal, traditionalist or conversionist, do relate to the linear theology, but they are divided between themselves. No longer do the divisions matter so much between the old denominations. There are new ones and these have been developed in reaction to the culture which ignores the churches.

The conversionists are positively opposed to then wider culture and are the forward moving evangelicals. They consist of the socially concerned, the activist fundamentalists and the charismatics. An important point is that although conversionism is largely descended from the Protestants, the charismatic movement is both Protestant and Catholic. The second group is the traditionalists who are defensively opposed to wider society; they can be Protestant or Catholic and even as narrow as one tradition amongst two or three within just one denomination. The third category is what I call orthodox liberalism, and they are interested in just maintaining the identity of the Church. They are those who maintain somehow the Incarnation and Resurrection beliefs but travel light on other more detailed doctrines. The fourth category is the heterodox liberalism of the mainstream and is sympathetic to outside culture. It questions even the basic doctrines. Finally, there are those connected to that position who realise they have sawn off the branch on which they need to sit. They tend to move outside the mainstream

and Unitarianism is one example of this kind of theology and authority, and indeed this is how we relate to the mainstream.

Now the approach of the local Longhill church is conversionist: it is Catholic charismatic. It is like this because of its origins, and as I shall suggest this is in some conflict with the mother church on Holderness Road as well as the estate.

Longhill church had died on its feet and it was closed for the interregnum. The congregation dispersed. When the new man, Gordon Fisher, came in 1984 he reopened it and expected no one would be there.

He tells an interesting story. In one Longhill house during the closure a prayer group started, at first just two people in a front room. It then grew and they received permission to meet in the church building which was, incidentally, still being used for other social meetings. So the new priest surprisingly found himself with a congregation, including youngsters, of about fifteen people. That has since doubled and is rising. He regards this secret rebirth as evidence of the Holy Spirit at work on the estate, and he equates it with the same force that was in the resurrection. He also accepts that this group was well on its way to being a charismatic House Church. As a Catholic traditionalist he set about integrating them through the eucharist to the Catholic side of the Church of England. Now, when I went a service there they

did not seem at all Catholic to me, but the Church of England gives the ability to priests to swing things their way.

The other church in the parish is not renewed and will not be under his guidance. But the new specially brought in mission priest is a Catholic charismatic. He agrees with the belief that the Holy Spirit is at work on the estate and hopes great things will happen there. However, his approach thoroughly charismatic. His Catholicism is more a matter of giving the charismatic movement a sacramental emphasis.

His main sympathy is not with the non-renewed mother church of the parish but the other renewed churches of the area. Most of these are evangelical but this does not matter. He wants to bring people to the faith and that means the activism of the charismatic movement rather than the defensiveness of traditionalism. He also rejoices in the ability of the charismatic movement to bring together Evangelicals and Catholics. Of course, it only brings together some Catholics and Evangelicals. So there is some conflict between the two churches of the parish, in the very way they face, and the unity of the charismatic movement is yet one more division.

The two men get on well and neither have any time for any liberalism. But under the surface are those tensions which exist everywhere else. I hope they can deny the divisions that happen elsewhere. I think both men are admirable

people for their constituents. The parish priest has an amazing ability to relate to his ordinary churchgoers, and the mission priest is equally friendly with those gathered people and relates directly to their faith. But already the recent bishops proposals to have women ordained in the Church will lead to the departure of the parish priest because he refuses to be ordained in a Catholic Church which alone has female priests. I made my view known to him that this would be a tragedy.

So I come to my main message which is that as I do the survey and my own work and look at all the divisions of religion I feel depressed. All about us we see the existence of the divisions which riddle organised Christianity and on top of this it is divided from the faith of the people.

Sometimes in Unitarianism we talk about tolerance, and this is a topic which lies at the heart of the matter. We aim for tolerating others and hope they can tolerate us. This is a route of religious development but as I try to be tolerant and complain about intolerance, I begin to think in another way, and begin to think that I should stop demanding it. Maybe it amounts to the same thing but I rather desire a choice of identities with each group representing one range of identities. So, therefore, I wouldn't ask a doctrinal religionist to be tolerant of me within his church because I would be wasting my breath.

I remember the religious conversations with the Longhill parish priest when he was saying he would leave the Church of England' s priesthood if it ordains women. He told me at the same time that I did not qualify as a Christian. At other times he has also argued with me about those individual creedal doctrines and that the Church of England should never again ordain a bishop who was like the Bishop of Durham. He has also called Unitarianism a "barnacle on the backside of Christianity". I think this is all very sad, sad because these opinions are seen to be necessary to protect Christianity and yet exist within a most attractive personality.

But notice what is happening when I make my complaint. The matter is personalised and what I am saying itself involves me in the divisiveness. When I complain I begin to participate in the mess of divisions. Indeed even to be standing here now is to participate in the mess.

Some of you may remember two students who came here for some weeks. In one morning they were here, they received a critique of the Creeds and were strongly challenged about the origins of Christianity. The result is that one is creedalist and the other is completely Christocentric. So what on earth was achieved at that time?

Let me surprise you. Something positive was achieved. Weeks before that morning I had been constantly asked by Lesley about Jesus of Nazareth. I

gave my views and she brought her friend who was both interested and doubtful (and with a Roman Catholic boyfriend). What has happened is that they have both gone to where they receive spiritual fulfilment. Now I think fundamentalism does not stand up to any intellectual credibility, but that such credibility is my little bias in life. We are dealing in the world of religion and that means accepting genuine experience. I have to say that I do not think the Unitarian Church can really cater for solidly Christocentric or systematic religionists: its diversity undermines the sense of direction that that kind of faith needs.

In the same way at Longhill, the people who are involved in that church do what is genuine to them. I have no criticism of what happens there - except one. This is just why did the people had to be integrated into one branch of the Church of England at all? I would have let them become a House church if that is what they wanted, although in doing so they would have missed out on their parish priest.

There is also the faith of the ordinary person, where the living of life is to be celebrated as in an English cultural Christianity. I have great reservations about participating in anything based on trying to convert that meaningful circular faith into a so called superior linear salvation faith. That is what the mission is all about, and I do not particularly like it. However, if my curiosity is traded off for their benefit then that is the cost of curiosity.

So what do think about this? I reckon that Christianity suffers division because it cannot escape the illusion that conformity is necessary. It ought to learn something from Hinduism; it ought to learn that there is something called diversity and genuine experience. If it learnt that then division would simply be a preference for style.

If I want to hear about the breadth of religious experience, if I want a service that relates to my liberality, I come here. If I want to involve myself in something sacramental I go to a mild Anglo-Catholic church, and if I want sheer friendship I go to Swine. But all the time these churches are playing the game of religious schism. Even when it is strenuously avoided, it comes up again and again. That is exactly what I have been talking about today. I cannot avoid it for sure.

Indeed, fundamental are the differences between the cultural faith, the faith of dogma (or anti-dogma) and the faith of experience. I also go to a Methodist church, a denomination born in division. It has a minister who wriggles and somersaults around the dogmas. But despite his doubts over supernaturalism, when I listen to him he says things in his sermons which make sense to me. That' s because he projects the prophetic faith that turns the appearance of things on their head. He recaptures the essence of the Jewish-Christian tradition which involves the challenge of thinking again and of hope.

So when I hear of all these divisions, when someone tells me that I am outside the fold, I simply think of their founder who stood for the inclusiveness of even the lowest. That is something we should all aim for, and perhaps the real reason why all these divisions are such a scandal. Yet again, in proposing one of the three types of faith, I am participating in division yet again.

So I am at base a reluctant Unitarian. You cannot escape and there is no way to avoid participating in the mess of the way human beings manage to divide themselves from each other. And I'm afraid this is the way we live, and whether it is the round of life, dogma, or striving towards a future Kingdom, we have to find a place where we belong and where we must make the best of a very bad job.

For reasons of continuity could we have the collection and then the notices after the last hymn?. We come this now. It is still represents division, it is still all part of the mess, but I think this hymn suggests the challenge that Jesus himself really offered, and is a good model for challenging division. We sing now hymn 37, When Jesus Walked Upon the Earth. This is the Jesus of the third, the prophetic kind of faith.

H y m n

The collection, with some music.

I finish with a curious reading and offer profound apologies to Christianity at large and Gandhi in particular, and I end with the thought that I now continue with divisive religion using a reading from Gandhi.

Man must choose either of the two courses, the upward or the downward; but as he has the brute in him, he will more easily choose the downward course than the upward, especially when the downward course is presented to him in a beautiful garb. Man easily capitulates when sin is presented in the garb of virtue. (Attenborough, R., 1982, p. 14.)

Thank you very much.

The notices.

[Hymn from Songs For Living]

[Adrian Worsfold].

[Service given on February 15th 1987 at Park Street Unitarian Church, Hull]