



Read the full text of Archbishop's address at the Council of the Wise, a two-day dialogue in Abu Dhabi:

I am delighted to be here, and profoundly honoured to have the opportunity to continue the process of relationship and dialogue with Al Azhar and the Muslim Council of Elders that began in 2002, and which has continued since through good times and bad. We owe much to the wisdom and courage of our predecessors. We are also indebted to other work, notably the Marrakesh Declaration on the protection of Minorities in Muslim majority lands. These relationships and declarations must always be upheld and their spirit followed through, because they are good, and because of our deep respect for those who have gone before us.

It is fitting too that we meet in a country which has taken practical steps to enable religious minorities to meet, teach, worship and express themselves. It shows a confidence in granting freedom, and a self confidence which is fitting and proper. We can only be grateful for the clear thinking expressed here. This freedom cannot be taken for granted in a world currently beset by a crisis of confidence in the rights it pledged itself to uphold in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The crisis is affecting all faith groups, deepening nationalist tensions, and leaking across from the approach to faith into the most acute challenges to international law, human flourishing and stability. It has renewed permission for those in political campaigns to condemn all Muslims, or other groups they dislike.

In the UK we find British values, so called, defined by Ofsted as belief in democracy, in the rule of law and in mutual respect of faiths, or for those of no faith. This approach is good, but entirely inadequate as a foundation for a healthy society. Democracy without fundamental values around the value of the human being, and, I would say, without the understanding of God's grace and love for the humanity God created, is a recipe for majority tyranny.

The impact of such tyranny was seen in the 1930s, when the law enacted by democratically elected government began the process of the Holocaust. Six million Jewish people were to be systematically slaughtered and millions more displaced in the most brutal antithesis of religious freedom. It was the very nadir of European life that had imploded morally and spiritually through the calculated dismantling of a consensus over the right of people and religious communities to flourish freely and without hindrance, harassment or legal impediment, so long as they neither incited hatred nor supported violence.

That consensus had arisen between 1518 and 1648 (with some hangover into the end of the 17th century and localised recurrences such as in Northern Ireland until the present day, or other areas of sectarian division) during the Reformation and counter-Reformation. From October 31st 1518, 499 years ago, when Martin Luther nailed his Theses the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Europe was at war over religious identity. In the 30 years war from 1618-1648 one third of the population of Germany died.

It was that crippling and disastrous legacy of religiously motivated, or at least religiously excused violence, that led to a sense in Europe that we should not fight over such things. But it is also fundamentally a theological issue.

In 2015 a powerful book* Dr Frances Flannery, a scholar at James Madison University in Washington, analysed the nature of apocalyptic terrorism. The author looks at case studies within the environmental movement, in Japan, amongst militant Christian militia groups in the USA, and in Islam.

For me the key finding was that whereas fundamentalist attitudes with an apocalyptic, imminent end of the world approach, in some groups might lead to psychological harm or isolation for their members, it was the sense of who was responsible for bringing in the rule of God that made the difference. If the answer was that God was responsible, the group was unlikely to be violent. Once they felt that they had a responsibility to do God's work in the place of God, then extreme violence was inevitable.

In other words the issue is theological. What is the understanding of God that we have in terms of responsibility for a righteous society.

We all have a vested interest in free and flourishing societies, but also in societies where behaviour is righteous, at least in the way that the Abrahamic faiths define righteous. In a very minimalist way that would include justice and peace, the common good, the care for the weak and poor, the rejection of violence as a way of resolving disputes, and security and equality before the law.

Historically we have based these values partly in reason, but fundamentally, as Christians, on our understanding of the nature and requirements of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and attested in the Scriptures. If Christians hold fast to the teaching of Jesus that “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free”, then the open discussion and testing of what we believe to be true, can only be to our collective advantage.

Over the last two hundred years that testing has radically changed our attitudes to slavery, to working conditions, to mutual responsibility, to the abuse of the vulnerable and weak, to care for the elderly, to universal medical care, how we treat women, and to minority group of every kind including religious, political, sexual, ethnic, provided they stay within tolerable boundaries of mutual responsibility to the rest of society.

We know that God created humanity in God’s own image- male and female He created us. And He created us to respond freely, not by compulsion or coercion, but to be in relationships of love with Him by choice. Yet God also set consequences for decisions. One Christian understanding of God's judgement is that we get what we choose. God does not stop us sinning, or suffering the consequences of sin. David chose to commit adultery with Bathsheba and the consequences were instability in his family, for his throne and the death of the resulting child.

That is the pattern to which we are called, a pattern of freedom to choose, but also the necessity to accept the consequences of choice. Thus in our jurisprudential system, an incapacity to make choices through insanity, or other reasons, is a defence against a criminal charge.

This theological account is the basis of liberalism, the ability to give a broad range to choices to people. Yet liberalism often evades the key theological question. If my responsibility is only about me, only I pay the price for what I do, then liberalism works. If my neighbour drinks too much that is his problem so long as it affects only him.

Yet within the Christian tradition is also the understanding that an evil society both makes it very hard for individuals within it to live well (a theme in the story both of Noah and of Lot in Sodom) but also brings the judgement of God on a society, a theme of the exile of the Jews to Babylon, and of the letters to the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation. This truth about the need for a righteous society has led and still leads many churches to advocate law as about morality, because bad morality leads to bad societies.

A second key point is that if we have a strong theology of the fall of humanity through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, then we need to acknowledge humanity's tendency to abuse power and to crush opposition to its power. There is a real danger of societies legislating against their ideological opponents through fear and ending up compromising their own moral and spiritual integrity by committing acts of evil against the very people they thought they were protecting the rest of society from.

Again there is much history in this area, especially in the anti Jewish laws in Europe going back to the early middle ages, and in the anti heretic laws and the use of criminal punishment for heretical religious opinions. It has also led to hypocritical laws on sexual morality, usually ending up being used as weapons rather than means of justice.

Christians need to own the fact that we are a faith with exclusive claims of revelation, truth and integrity. We possess little explicit scriptural evidence of a call for freedom of religion. If we are to make the case for the right of others of different views and traditions to worship freely or not at all, then we need a systematic interpretation of God's nature and modelling for humanity.

Grace and mercy, with justice and righteousness are characteristics at the heart of God's nature, while force and compulsion are not.

However, Christians have more recently been on the receiving end of persecution both from militantly atheist and religiously intolerant regimes. It would not be over-stating matters to say that Christianity is both the numerically largest faith and the most persecuted. The historic centre of the Christian Church in the Middle East has never felt so threatened, but is also under attack in countries as diverse as North Korea and Eritrea, where Christians are harassed, imprisoned, persecuted and killed. We are grateful for the protection of the Church and advocacy of the rights of Christians in majority Muslim lands and I want to say thank you.

Sixty eight years after the United Nations agreed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this situation is intolerable and as faith communities we must step up and hold governments to account. This is a challenge for us all everywhere but none-more-so than in countries where faith communities have serious power through numerical, political or civic strength.

The right to life is more than just the right not to be killed; it is the right to flourish as fully rounded human beings: body, mind and spirit together. Religious freedom is more than just freedom from persecution; it is the freedom to choose how to express our understanding of our relationship with God. Faith groups should be at the forefront of advocacy for human rights because we recognise that ultimately, we are answerable and accountable to God alone who created individuals with dignity and integrity. This freedom is integral to the flourishing of our societies, but it does not emerge in a vacuum and neither does it come without responsibility.

If we cherish our own rights, then we must have regard for the rights and sensitivities of others. We have a collective responsibility to each other in a world created by God for our dependence upon Him and on one another. Jesus reminded us that our fullest expression in creation is in loving God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and in loving our neighbours as ourselves (Luke 10:27). Where the Church is not acting on this commandment to love, it is not the Church. Jesus went further in clarifying that our neighbours are not just the people we identify with ethnically, nationally or religiously, but are in fact anyone we encounter and especially those in need.

Jesus inaugurated a kingdom which was relational, attractional and non-violent. The kingdom was open to all who received and responded to God's invitation. To coax, coerce or compel people to swear allegiance to this kingdom confounds and contradicts the very nature of the kingdom itself. Too often the Church has taken this route in its long 2,000 years of history. We are called to seek the common good of all because we are called to witness to the emerging kingdom which we believe brings the promise of renewal and restoration to all.

Anglicans around the world, and in the Church of England with our particular position in the country, engage at governmental level but also at the grassroots as we endeavour to build relationships of trust, integrity and love. These relationships are the building blocks for integrated communities and integrated societies. For these relationships to flourish and to have integrity, there must be equal protection in law and civic society for each person and for each community regardless of ethnicity, background, creed or affiliation.

Within the United Kingdom, Christians and Muslims have worked together on a government funded initiative, run by the Church of England, called Near Neighbours which has catalysed hundreds of grassroots socially transformative projects. We have also worked together to provide a clear moral voice on political and legislative decision-making. Sometimes we succeeded, sometimes we have failed.

The Church of England is at the forefront of advocating the rights of Muslim communities to establish schools, madrassahs and mosques across the country. We have established and participated in faiths forums where the collective voice of faith communities in a largely secular society, can be heard more clearly. It is a cause for celebration that faith communities play such a vibrant role in every strata of British life and society.

But the increasing integration of Muslim communities within British society, in which we rejoice, is in stark contrast to the increasing marginalisation of and outright hostility to Christian communities within many parts of the world, not least in significant parts of the Middle East.

It will be a joy to worship today at St Andrew’s Church here in Abu Dhabi and it is to the credit of the authorities and government here that Christian worship has been allowed to flourish and grow and we thank you again. I am concerned that this is becoming the exception rather than the rule though in many parts of the world.

The challenge then is for all of us at this conference to make some serious progress in establishing not just the theological foundations for flourishing and integrated societies where freedom of religion and belief is a given, but to go much further and to establish practical steps to ensure this happens in the societies and countries we represent and live in.

*Frances Flannery. Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset (Routledge, 2015).

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