

The Eighteenth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

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New College, The University of Edinburgh

at Westminster Abbey

on Thursday 8th May, 2003

and subsequently at Keble College, Oxford

***BEYOND RACISM AND SECTARIANISM:
Is Religion the Problem or the Solution?***

The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund was endowed by friends of Eric Abbott to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality. The venue for the lecture will vary between London, Oxford and Lincoln.

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Published by
The Dean's Office,
King's College, London
Tel: (020) 848 2333 Fax: (020) 848 2344

BEYOND RACISM AND SECTARIANISM: Is Religion the Problem or the Solution?

It is a particular pleasure for me to give a lecture in honour of the late Eric Abbott. I think the title for my lecture – *Beyond Racism and Sectarianism* – relates to one of his abiding interests, making this House, in the words carved on his tombstone, ‘a place of pilgrimage and prayer for all peoples’. ‘Eric’s aim’, wrote Robert Runcie, ‘was to relate the Abbey to the profoundest needs and aspirations of the modern world and to proclaim a message of reconciliation’. In undertaking this task, he had, according to his close friend Eric James, a ‘vision of the Abbey as a great church in which all questing men and women, irrespective of faith and race would “see Jesus”’.¹ And so I hope what I have to say would be recognized by him as attempting to engage with very central concerns of his, which are matters of continuing and urgent relevance to church and society in these isles.

Racism is clearly an increasingly serious problem in many parts of Britain. Racist attacks and even murders are a major law and order issue in most of our cities. Major institutions have been accused again and again of institutionalized racism. Asylum seekers are treated as a problem, and the crisis of global terrorism has led to deep suspicion in some quarters of citizens or visitors from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The British National Party appears to be in the ascendant, and in some places Black Britons feel insecure as never before. Many British Muslims feel threatened on a daily basis, and in some of the minority communities there is much anger uncertainty and confusion. Today it is not only in Northern Ireland that sectarianism and religious bigotry, exacerbating differences among Christians and using Christian rhetoric, continue to lead to violence, fear and anger.

Sectarianism² and religious bigotry in Scotland hit the headlines in no uncertain manner when nearly three years ago when James Macmillan, probably Scotland’s

¹ These two citations are from *Eric Symes Abbott KCVO, DD: A Portrait*. London: Westminster Abbey, 1983.

greatest living composer, and a pious Roman Catholic, declared sectarianism and bigotry to be ‘Scotland’s shame’ in a lecture at Edinburgh International Festival. Prejudice was, he declared, still directed at Roman Catholics, so that ‘There is still, even today, a palpable sense of some threat and hostility to all things Catholic in this country’.³ And more recently the debate was broadened when Rowena Arshad, the Director of the Centre for Racial Equality and an equal opportunities commissioner for Scotland, declared that Scotland suffers from a ‘*polite and insidious racism*’. ‘We must,’ she said, ‘start listening to people who encounter racism every day and tolerate discrimination in silence. It is time to stop treating ethnic minorities as victims in need of help, but as equal citizens capable of shaping the Scotland of tomorrow’.⁴ There is a worrying upsurge of Islamophobia, and in various parts of the country, including Edinburgh, mosques have been torched and Muslims intimidated or attacked.

Accordingly in this lecture I want to address the question of how we move beyond polite and genteel – or impolite and aggressive - sectarianism, racism and bigotry, and what insights and resources Christian theology and the churches might be able to offer, not forgetting the contribution of other faith communities – always remembering that religion in many contexts worldwide is probably still more part of the problem than part of the solution. For the sake of today and tomorrow we need to learn how to deal with the past. As Michael Lapsley from Northern Ireland said in South Africa:

Many societies have tried to bury the past. No society in history has succeeded. Too often, victims have become victimisers of others... Our challenge as a nation today is to break that chain. We cannot allow our memories to remain gaping wounds which imprison and dehumanise us.⁵

In this lecture I want to focus on the healing of memories, the importance of truth and forgiveness, the role of the churches, the need to celebrate diversity, and the central process of reconciliation.

² I am working with the lucid understanding of sectarianism in Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegge, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2001, pp. 102-3.

³ James Macmillan, ‘Scotland’s Shame’, T.M. Devine, ed., *Scotland’s Shame: Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000, p. 15.

⁴ *The Herald*, 26 April 2002.

⁵ Cited in Andrew Morton, ed., *A Turning Point in Ireland and Scotland? The Challenge to the Churches and Theology Today*. Edinburgh: CTPI, 1998, p. 03

The Burden of the Past

The past, our memories, our history ought to be something in which we delight, for these memories define who we are. But only too often the past is not only a burden but a constant spring of bitterness and anger. Often our stories define us *against* others, or we airbrush those who are different from us out of our stories. Some memories make us maudlin or bitter. Other memories, other stories, affirm us and tell us where we belong and for whom we are accountable.

It is not only in Ireland that bitter memories make the past a burden that divides communities and still has the capacity to evoke a destructive rage. A kind of genteel sectarianism and prejudice was widely assumed in the Scotland of my boyhood. Most of it was based on ignorance rather than deep-seated intolerance and suspicion. And the fault was not entirely on one side, although I think the powerful and entrenched majority has to bear the major weight of responsibility. And today we must link racism with sectarianism as dominant forms of exclusion and humiliation of the other, of those who are significantly different.

A few years ago when the late Donald Dewar came to New College, Edinburgh, to announce to the assembled press and the television cameras that the Scottish Parliament would meet at first in what is an integral part of the New College buildings, the General Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland, he moved nervously to and fro, anxious it seemed that the statue of John Knox within the quadrangle should never come into the frame. In this determination not to identify in any way the new Scotland with the particular past typified by the statue of Knox, Dewar exemplified a remarkable recent sea change in Scottish culture and consciousness. That statue of Knox was erected in the late nineteenth century, as the inscription on its plinth declares, 'by Scotsmen who are mindful of the benefits conferred by John Knox on their native land'. The Reverend Ian Paisley has been known to come to pay his respects to the statue of John Knox – I nearly said, worship at the shrine of John Knox! Now, it seemed, the new Scotland was to be entirely secular and the religious past, with all its glories and its horrors, was to be erased from memory, specifically because it was seen as divisive.

Besides, the icon of John Knox has always excluded those who have great difficulty in seeing *that* story as *their* story. I vividly remember taking a class of mainly

Presbyterian students to mass at an Edinburgh Roman Catholic Church. In the discussion over coffee afterwards one of the parishioners rather surprised the students by mentioning the statue of Knox in our quadrangle, and saying, 'We find what that statue stands for alien, threatening, unattractive. It may be your story, but it's not our story.'

We need to possess, and sometimes heal, our history, and not forget it or disown it as if it had not made us who we are. 'The past', as William Faulkner wrote, 'is not dead and gone, it isn't even past.'⁶ It is certainly not past in Loyalist areas of Belfast, with huge murals on the gable ends showing King Billy on a rearing charger at the Battle of the Boyne and the slogan, 'Remember 1690'. Nor is it past in Drogheda, with all its memories of Cromwell's depredations. Or in Liverpool, Bristol, or Glasgow with all their involvement with the slave trade, which we whites have for the most part forgotten. But the past has not been consigned to oblivion for any of us. We need to learn how to handle it.

We have two – or rather several – stories of Britain and Ireland, variant and divergent memories of the past, some of them very gloomy and bitter. We have seen, and are seeing, in Northern Ireland, in parts of Scotland, and many other places in these isles how stories, histories, memories of the past can become more and more distinct and opposed, without touching places. And such conflicting memories fuel misunderstanding and even hostility. One of the things we should have learned from Northern Ireland is the importance and the necessity of the healing and reconciling of memories. The past cannot, and must not be, forgotten. But memories must be healed and reconciled if the past is to be a resource for the future.

Today, in the new, more pluralist Britain, we have an additional task and opportunity – attending to and integrating the memories of the New Britons in their various groupings with the older store of memories. We need to blend together and where necessary reconcile the rich and varied memories of Britons old and new. For Britain is more diverse and plural now, and British identity cannot be basically Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, or even Christian. Britain should be a land in which

⁶ Cited in Liechty and Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, p. 66.

people are bound together by sharing their pasts, their fears and their hopes, and rejoicing in their rich diversity.

Some living memories are painful, bitter, gloomy and divisive. They haunt and disable us, and set us against one another – memories of the Irish Potato Famine, of Cromwell’s invasion, of the Battle of the Boyne, of the nineteenth century Highland Clearances, memories of being at the receiving end of oppression, exploitation and prejudice, memories of being victims. Sometimes we hang onto these memories of being victims long after the reality has changed radically. The victors and the comfortable usually find it easy to forget, but sometimes, even in prosperity and contentment, we still define ourselves as victims and continue to rage against our ancient oppressors. There are living collective memories of the past, and sometimes of the very recent past, which are bitter and call out for healing. They need to be faced; there must be a healing of memories and a facing of the truth of today, there must be forgiveness and reconciliation if past divisions are not to haunt and cripple us in the present. Memories cannot be simply set aside, or forgotten to order, as we face the future and strive to build an open, rich and diverse community. Healing of memories is quite different from forgetting. We need to learn how to make the past, the story, the memory not a burden and a source of bitterness and division, but a joy and a resource. We need to see differences as precious, wonderful, open and welcoming rather than threatening. We need to discover how to rejoice in our rich diversity, and enrich one another with our differences.

Truth Telling

Memories are potent, for good or ill. Again and again we find the past, the story, the memories a burden rather than a joy and a resource. How can we see differences as precious, wonderful, enriching rather than threatening? How do we rejoice in our rich diversity? And we have hardly begun to glance at the memories of the other, when the other is a Muslim or a Hindu, or a Pentecostal Christian of Caribbean origin, whose ancestors were slaves.

In South Africa they are still going through a healing of memories in the new *kairos* after their apartheid past, with all its entail of violence, atrocities, wounds and

bitterness. They have been engaged in what Desmond Tutu calls ‘the difficult but ultimately rewarding path of destroying enemies by turning them into friends.’⁷ The issues of guilt and of retribution are not avoided or disguised, but they are put within a broader frame and a fuller understanding. Above all, the truth must be faced and moral responsibility accepted.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission held hearings throughout the country under slogans such as ‘Revealing is Healing’, ‘Truth the Road to Reconciliation’, and ‘The Truth Hurts, But Silence Kills’,⁸ . inviting people to tell the truth, and listen to the truth of others, for the healing of memories, for the redress of offences, for the overcoming of animosities and the lies that hostility engenders, and above all, quite consciously for reconciliation.

An old woman tells of the disappearance of her fifteen year old son years before. She had heard he had been tortured and killed. She wanted to know the truth, what had happened, who had killed her son, and where. The only redress she asked for was to know that they were sorry. Then she could forgive and turn to the future.

Top generals of the old Special Branch and the Army approached the Commission to enquire whether, if they accepted responsibility for a list of atrocities, killings and illegalities, that is, if they told the truth there was a possibility of amnesty: a tricky question, because cheap forgiveness is no forgiveness at all, and outrages the memory of the victims. But the Commission was entrusted with the power to grant amnesty where clear penitence is expressed in a willingness to make restitution, even if largely symbolic (the dead cannot be brought back to life), and where amnesty serves for the healing of memories in the nation.

The former President, F.W.de Klerk, declares before the Commission: ‘The National Party is prepared to admit its many mistakes of the past and is genuinely repentant...and we have gone on our knees before God Almighty to pray for his forgiveness’.⁹ And when President Nelson Mandela visited a hearing of the Commission in Johannesburg the subject on which evidence was being given was atrocities committed

⁷ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* London: Rider, 1999, p. 138.

⁸ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.London: Rider, 1999, p. 81.

by the African National Congress upon suspected dissidents in exile in Lusaka. The offences of the victors too need to be taken to the bar of truth, brought into the open, if healing and reconciliation are to be possible.

Truth telling is vitally important. The truth can exorcise memories which are based on lies. A community that is founded on lies cannot survive in harmony. We need to speak truth to one another, and we need our leaders to tell us the truth. But it is not only religious believers, of course, who care passionately about the truth. Michael Walzer reminds us that in 1989 huge crowds gathered in Prague behind banners emblazoned with the one word, **Truth**. 'They were not marching in defence of the coherence theory or the consensus theory of truth. Perhaps they disagreed about such theories among themselves; more likely they did not care about them.' But the demonstrators wanted 'to hear true statements from their political leaders, they wanted to be able to believe what they read in the newspapers, they didn't want to be lied to any more.'¹⁰ We also want and deserve to hear the truth from our leaders, secular and religious. The truth may sometimes be acutely uncomfortable but it is vitally important, for a society founded on lies, even 'white lies' cannot last or flourish. The truth can exorcise bitter memories, especially if forgiveness is also asked for.

The imperative for religious people is to live truthfully, and to speak truth to power. We should seek to speak from the deepest insights of our faith, and to address the powers with courage and directness. And we should do more than speak; we *witness* to the truth, and seek to express in our lifestyle the truth we speak. And when that happens, we find that the truth is healing.

That remarkable and puzzling figure, Mahatma Gandhi, called his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.¹¹ Truth, for him, was not simply a matter of true or false propositions; it was something to be lived and loved. And the truth that is lived was for him the surest foundation for politics and public life, especially in a society that was bitterly and deeply divided on a religious and caste basis.. The struggle for

⁹ *The Scotsman*, 22 August 1996.

¹⁰ Walzer, Michael, *Thick and Thin*, cited in Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, London: SCM, 1997, pp. 94-5.

¹¹ M.K. Gandhi, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*.

truthfulness was a kind of spiritual discipline, bringing one's own life-style into conformity with the truth one speaks and proclaims. Gandhi saw himself as a witness to the truth, and sought to influence others to walk in the ways of truth both in public and in private. The two were for him inseparable.

But *Satyagraha*, or truth-force, was more than a non-violent method of achieving political ends. Its record of achieving freedom with minimal violence and in binding together the community in the struggle was not only a way of achieving independence, it was also the beginning of a process of nation-building and reconciliation which had great significance in the initial framing of the Republic of India after Gandhi's death. *Satyagraha* tackled, with some success, the purification of India from untouchability and the excesses of the caste system. It sought to bring together in a context of truthfulness the often hostile religious and caste communities of India. It did not treat India as simply an innocent victim of imperialism; India too had to be purified, disciplined and renewed if it was to be fit for independence. It is not surprising that *Satyagraha* exercised great healing influence not only on the civil rights struggle in the United States, but in movements for independence throughout Africa and parts of Asia. It should be more influential than it is today.

Forgiving

The South African experience with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission points to the public importance of forgiveness. Hannah Arendt made the, to her, surprising discovery that Jesus Christ was the one who discovered the central role of forgiveness in human life.¹² She believed that this 'sprang from experiences in the small and closely knit community of his followers, bent on challenging the public authorities in Israel'. The significance of forgiveness and reconciliation, which lie at the heart of the Christian message and Christian morality, is to be exemplified in the life of the church.

It is not easy for political leaders to apologize and say sorry – although Tony Blair did just this in relation to the British Government's actions, or rather inaction, in relation to the Irish Potato Famine long, long after the event. And a great opportunity to say sorry was missed when the Queen and Prince Philip visited Dresden fifty years after the

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959, p.215.

blanket bombing of that great city by the RAF. And it is no easier for a collectivity or an individual to forgive. But when it takes place, forgiveness can be deeply healing, as these two true stories suggest.

Mary McAleese, the former President of Ireland, tells the story of Gordon Wilson:

Gordon Wilson...was a man so practised in the discipline of love that when his beautiful daughter Marie died, hard and cruelly, at the slaughter that was the Enniskillin bombing, her hand in his as she slipped away, the words of love and forgiveness sprang as naturally to his lips as a child's eyes are drawn to its mother. His words shamed us, caught us off guard. They seemed so different from what we expected and what we were used to. They brought stillness with them. They carried a sense of the transcendent into a place so ugly we could hardly bear to watch. But he had his detractors, and unbelievably his bags of hate mail. How dare you forgive, they shouted? What kind of father are you who can forgive your daughter's killers? It was as if they had never heard the command to love and forgive anywhere before. It was as if they were being spoken for the first time in the history of humanity and Christ had never uttered the words, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' As one churchgoing critic said to me on the subject of Gordon Wilson 'Sure the poor man must have been in shock.' As if to offer love and forgiveness is a sign of mental weakness instead of spiritual strength.¹³

Another true story was taken from *The Times* in March last year by Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, in his wonderful book *The Dignity of Difference*.

'Laura Blumenfeld is a young American Jew. In 1986 her father, a rabbi, was visiting Jerusalem. While walking in the Old City he was shot by a Palestinian terrorist. The bullet missed his brain by half an inch. Seriously injured, he survived. His daughter, however, could not forget or forgive. Years later, by then a journalist, she travelled to Israel, and without disclosing her identity, befriended the family of the gunman and began a correspondence with the terrorist himself, now in jail. Not knowing that he was speaking to the victim's daughter, the father of the gunman explained why his son shot an American stranger: 'He did his duty. Every Palestinian must do it. Then there will be justice.' Another son added: 'My brother never met the man personally.

¹³ Desmond Tutu, *No future without Forgiveness*. London: Rider, 1999.

It's not a personal issue. Nothing personal, so no revenge.' Laura writes in her diary, 'The heat was rising in my face. It was personal. It was personal to me.'

She attends the terrorist's trial and persuades counsel – still without revealing who she is – to let her give testimony. On the witness stand she finally discloses the fact that she is the victim's daughter and that she has come to know the gunman and his family so that they can put a personal face to the family of the injured man and understand that there is no such thing as an impersonal victim of violence. In the middle of her cross-examination, she is interrupted by another voice:

A woman stood up at the back of the courtroom. She blurted out in English, in a loud, shaking voice, 'I forgive Omar for what he did.'

Forgive? It was my mother. This was not about forgiveness, didn't she understand. This was my revenge.

'And if the Blumenfeld family can forgive Omar', my mother continued, 'it's time for the State of Israel to forgive him.''¹⁴

The Churches: Problem or Solution?

'We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another', wrote Dean Swift.¹⁵ Sectarianism and racism are 'destructive ways of dealing with differences.'¹⁶ And the churches and other faith groups have a huge responsibility for encouraging or allowing the growth of sectarianism, which is in contrast to the deeper insights of Christian and other faith. But the churches have also shown themselves capable of responding vigorously and effectively to the challenges of sectarianism and racism by presenting a working model of a community which celebrates difference and cultivates charity. 'Time and again we have been reminded,' writes Jonathan Sacks, 'that religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal and mild. It is fire. – and like fire, it warms but it also burns.'¹⁷ Those who tend this fire have the responsibility for ensuring that it enlightens and warms rather than destroying and consigning to the flames.

¹⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*. London: Continuum, 2002, pp. 188-9

¹⁵ Dean Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*. 1711.

¹⁶ Liechty and Clegg, op. cit., p. 152.

¹⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London: Continuum, 2002, p. 11.

The Second Vatican Council rather daringly declared:

By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all [hu]mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity.¹⁸

The wording is unambiguous in suggesting that the Church is, or is called to be, an exemplification of a kind of community which God intends to encompass all humankind, and of which the Church is also to be an instrument, helping to bring such inclusive community into existence as well as providing a preliminary manifestation of it. The term 'instrument' suggests that the Church has a servant role, helping with the overcoming of ancient hostilities and the establishment of the kind of reconciled community in which human beings may flourish together in love and justice.

The Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968 adopted similar language, declaring that 'The Church is bold in speaking of itself as the sign of the coming unity of mankind'.¹⁹ It was increasingly emphasised that the 'sign' was 'a calling and a task', not something that was already complete and perfect, fully expressed in the visible Church. The Church could only become an instrument for the healing of the nations 'as a community which is itself being healed'. Despite its divisions, which so often in fact reflect and exacerbate the divisions of the world, the Church may be 'the foretaste of a redeemed creation, a sign of the coming unity of mankind, a pointer to the time when God shall be all in all.'²⁰

These are vast and daunting claims made for the Church. It is to be an anticipation of God's Reign, an earnest or down-payment, enabling people to glimpse and experience the authentic flavour of God's Reign, cherishing and respecting the precious differences among human beings. The church is called to be an exemplary community, existing for the sake of the world. And more, it is to be an instrument, not so much for bringing or building God's Reign as for spreading throughout human society the values, social structures and attitudes which are characteristic of the Reign of God, which is still

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.1.

¹⁹ *The Uppsala Report 1968*. Geneva: WCC, 1968, p. 17.

²⁰ This paragraph is much indebted to G. Gassmann's article, 'The Church as Sacrament, Sign and Instrument', in Limouris, Gennadios, ed., *Church, Kingdom, World: The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986.

to come as gift and as grace in its fullness. But the Church, in using such language, is committing itself to being a community which seeks to follow and exemplify the kind of inclusive fellowship which was characteristic of the disciples and others who gathered around Jesus. Only thus may it be a sacrament, sign and instrument of the unity of all humankind.

And here's the rub: churches are usually far better at presenting themselves as fellowships of moral achievers than as communities of forgiven sinners whose message is about the availability of forgiveness and reconciliation, communities that celebrate diversity. The rhetoric and the reality of the churches often are at odds with one another. There is a necessity for the church to exemplify its message if it is to be taken seriously, and for that message to be one of truth, healing, reconciliation and trust rather than respectability or boundary maintenance.

Unless churches and faith communities of different traditions and in different contexts can demonstrate that they are committed to a costly and enriching process of reconciliation among themselves, they cannot expect the broader public to take their rhetoric of reconciliation seriously. And we all need to learn a new modesty as we seek unity and exercise the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us. For all of us it is easier to love the neighbour who is like oneself than the stranger who is different. But we are all called to love the stranger and celebrate difference and diversity.

DBF: 7/4/03