

**UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER
STERNBERG LECTURE**

Tuesday 13 March 2012

ADDRESS OF THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS

‘The Journey to God and Faith Today’

I am very grateful for this opportunity to return to Leicester University and present this Sternberg Lecture on the theme 'The Journey to God and Faith Today', touching on four interconnected aspects of that broad theme. First, a broad reflection on the sacredness of our world and how awareness of the sacred has fashioned so much of all that surrounds us; the second is a brief explanation of the principles which guide and shape the efforts of the Catholic Church in inter-religious dialogue; then, as three and four, applications of these broader observations to two more particular points: how our religious beliefs can contribute to public debate and one example of a remarkable witness to the importance of the spiritual quest in matters of faith and our journey to God.

Part One: Our Religious Heritage

This month a book was published called 'Sacred Land', by Martin Palmer. It invites us to look again at our world and see its almost hidden sacred character. It also argues strongly the environmental cause. The book insists that this country is full of very familiar places whose sacredness we can easily forget. It points to four kinds of such places: those made sacred by our acts of dedication: mosques, synagogues, ghudwaras, churches; those places which are sacred because, in their beauty or majesty, they have the power to lift our hearts to the author all things; those which have been made sacred by an event which has given them an indelible character - Clifford Tower, in York, for example, where in 1190 a mass suicide of Jews occurred in the face of an anti-Semitic mob; and those places made sacred to us in a very personal way because of a defining experience or a crucial decision happened there .

Martin Palmer's point is that we must not neglect or lose such perspectives because they form an important part of how we understand ourselves not only individually but also as a society.

He writes:

'These places are sacred because they link in to the divine and give us a sense of meaning. They add significance to what lies around us, to our work, families, community and histories. Believing that some places are sacred means that we do not see ourselves only as selfish genes or random acts of procreation but as parts of a greater narrative within which we have the opportunity to play a part.'

In this fascinating book we learn how to read the layout of streets in our older towns

and cities; we learn about the placing of churches in relation to the 'geography' of the Christian faith. So, for example, a Church of St. Michael is often found in the northern part of a town, because danger and threat come from the north -at least in terms of frost and snow - and St. Michael is the saint of protection against harm. The author invites us to read afresh how the environment speaks to us of the presence of the sacred and how the sacred is brought right down to earth - literally.

The book is grand in its sweep. It identifies five great narratives of meaning which have shaped this land: the age of ancestor worship, from 5000-3000BC; the age of mysterious stone circles from 3000-1160BC; the Celtic and Roman period from 1160BC-400AD; the monastic-Catholic period from 500-1600AD and the present period of Protestant individualism and the subsequent Deism of our industrialised, urbanised age. The book gives us a wonderful quotation from Charles Dickens to illustrate the spirit of this last period, in the words of Gradgrind, the headmaster in 'Hard Times':

'Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.'

I shall return to this view of learning later and its consequences which are not hard to see.

This division into five periods is obviously speculative and contentious. But Martin Palmer's underlying point is that each period has left its mark on our land because each has provided a grand narrative by which people have shaped their understanding of who they are and where they stand in relation to one another. He observes that four have faded or disappeared, and the fifth is now in the process of disintegration. An absence of a coherent grand narrative is a state into which, he suggests, we are now entering.

Indeed, the landscape is changing. New buildings are, for the most part, functional and intended to be short-lived. The expectation is that a new £400 million pound hospital will be replaced again in 30 years' time. In this context, which has many contributory causes, it is even more important that we know our history and it's increasingly hidden spiritual and religious inheritance, and that we treasure the new expressions of religious meaning which are appearing here in our landscape.

There is so much to be learned. All across our landscape are places and buildings that speak eloquently of the richness of our spiritual quest and religious convictions. Ignorance of them means that we travel with our eyes cast down, or blind-folded, depriving ourselves of so much encouragement and inspiration. At least I know that in some places children make regular visits to churches and mosques, learning to read them, impressed by all they proclaim and enriched by the experience. Often these are places of beauty even more than places of purpose or function. And that beauty is often the most eloquent witness to meaning and hope, to the quest for God. The teaching of this literacy, then, is a crucial task that mainly lies before us.

Part Two: Catholicism and other Religions

In order to understand and conduct such a shared exploration of our religious traditions – and now I come to the second part of what I want to say this evening – it is helpful to have some clear principles and guidance about how we understand the differences between our religious traditions and the relationships between them. This is important if we are truly to appreciate the richness of each rather than simply reduce each religious belief to that which may be shared in common. Each contributes to the ‘sacredness’ of this land and each adds to the ‘spiritual’ environment in which we live. So the seriousness with which we approach our dialogue and exploration has important consequences.

You will not be surprised that I speak now from an explicitly Catholic perspective.¹

At the outset, I wish to make very clear that dialogue is not simply about study and discussion. That is clearly a vital part of our journey to understand each other more deeply. But dialogue includes all positive and constructive relationships with individuals and communities of a different religion directed toward mutual understanding and enrichment. In the words of the Blessed Pope John Paul II: *Dialogue is not so much an idea to be studied as a way of living in positive relationship with others* (address to PCID, 26th April 1990).

Interreligious dialogue, then, embraces simply living as good neighbours with those of other religions, or - to go a step further - trying to understand better their religions and to experience something of their life and culture. It also takes the form of acting together in matters of common concern and values, such as in issues of justice, peace, the good of the world as created by God, or engaging in activities which protect human life from conception to death. The Catholic Church welcomes opportunities for collaborating with members of other religions in fields where they have similar concerns and values.

This broad definition of dialogue is important because we face a common task together: that of speaking eloquently, in word and deed, to a society which is losing its capacity to connect with our spiritual roots and to translate that dimension of human life into concerted action.

A second key principle needs to be in place, too. Authentic dialogue does not mean adopting a ‘relativist’ stance whereby all religions are reduced to “being the same really”. Dialogue is not the watering down of beliefs. We must never try to smooth out or, worse, ignore, irreducible differences. Indeed, true dialogue takes place between those well grounded in their own religion and who have moved beyond a well intentioned, but mistaken, desire to avoid disagreement.

So, in this dialogue, as a Catholic Christian, I hold to my central belief that, “in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, who is ‘the way the truth and the life’ (Jn. 14:16), the full revelation of divine truth is given” (*Dominus Iesus* 5). In my

¹ Our understanding of interreligious dialogue is faithfully presented in a booklet published by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales entitled: *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger: Fostering mutual respect and understanding between the religions*. I will be drawing on this extensively and invite you to read it for yourselves.

faith I know that he is the one in “whom people find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself” (*Nostra aetate* 2).

At the same time, I know that the one and the same God is the source of every element of truth and holiness to be found within each different religion. Whilst the Catholic Church insists that Christ is the one and only mediator of the salvation which God wills for all people, the Church gladly recognizes (to use terms dating from the earliest centuries of Christianity) “seeds of the Word” or “rays of one Truth” emanating from the single Creator of all that is true and holy.²

Three interlocking themes underpin the Church’s positive attitude to people of other religious communities: *the unity of the human race*; *the need to be open to all that is true and holy in other religions*, and *the call to dialogue*.

The unity of the human race is our shared point of departure. The Church teaches that:

“All nations are one community and have one origin, because God caused the whole human race to dwell on the whole face of the earth. They also have one final end, God, whose providence, manifestation of goodness and plans for salvation are extended to all” (NA 1).

This truth is the source of the dignity of all human beings, and of their equality, for each is a person created in the image of God. Religious freedom flows from this equal dignity. Because of it every person has immunity from coercion and no-one should be forced to act against his or her own conscience in religious matters or, within due limits, be prevented from acting in accordance with that conscience (see *Dignitatis Humanae* 2). Hence the right to places of worship and religious associations and practice is also upheld.

This human unity and innate dignity means the Church is open to all that is holy and true in other religions. Catholic teaching affirms that followers of other religions can receive the saving grace of God and obtain eternal salvation (see *Lumen gentium* 16 and *Dominus Iesus* 22). But this teaching understands that this grace and this salvation are essentially related to the unique saving work of Christ and his Body, the Church. It is bestowed on those outside the visible Church thanks to the presence there of the Holy Spirit who, we believe, is always the gift of the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ. And we believe that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth (Jn.16.12) .

Bl. John Paul II spoke of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit being limited neither by space nor time. The Spirit is at the very source of our religious questioning and “the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history” (RM 28).

² This insight was fully developed in the Church’s teaching in the ground-breaking Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, *Nostrae aetate*, promulgated in 1965. There we read: “Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians” (NA 2).

By insisting that this presence and activity of the Holy Spirit can only be understood in relation to Christ and cannot be separated from the particular working of the Holy Spirit in the Church, a vital point is being made: precisely because it is the same divine Spirit at work in both, then the Church and other religions are positively and profoundly related to each other. This is the true depth of our relationship. This is our common bond. And within this common bond, the various religions each have their own distinctive relationship to the Church.

This has a crucial consequence for our Catholic involvement in all inter-religious dialogue. It means that our dialogue with each religion has its own particular character, respectful of the character of that religion.

Because her origins are embedded in the relationship God has with them, the Church has a unique and precious affinity to Jewish people. Indeed, the Church *is nourished from the root of the good olive tree, on to which the branches of the wild olive tree of the gentiles has been grafted (Rm 1:17)*. The Jewish people are, as Bl. John Paul II stated, the “beloved of God” who has called them with an “irrevocable calling”, and whose covenant with them “has never been revoked”.

Christianity also shares many common traditions with Islam. Albeit in different ways, Christianity, Judaism and Islam claim Abraham as their ancestor, honouring his close relationship with God. All three worship the one God, even if their own traditions understand and relate to God in different ways. During his visit to Turkey in 2006 Pope Benedict XVI said this:

“Christians and Muslims belong to the family of those who believe in the one true God and who, according to their respective traditions, trace their ancestry to Abraham. The human and spiritual unity in our origins and destiny impels us to seek a common path, as we play our part in the quest for fundamental values so characteristic of the people of our time...” (Address to the President of the Turkish Religious affairs Directorate, November, 2006)

Sikhism, shares with Christianity belief in the one Creator God and the equality of all humans as God’s creatures. In the spirit of its founder Guru Nanak, it seeks peaceful relations with other religions. Its strong tradition of hospitality has been enjoyed by many a Catholic!

The Church also pays tribute to the ancient and richly varied **Hindu** traditions (e.g. see NA 2) which give admirable witness to the human yearning for the divine, the importance of family life and to the possibility that different religions can live in peace.

The Church sees much of value in Buddhism, not least its commitment to peace and justice. On a visit to Korea in 1984, Bl. John Paul II applauded Buddhism (and Confucianism) with these words:

“The profound reverence for life and nature, the quest for truth and harmony, self-abnegation and compassion, the ceaseless striving to transcend – these are among

the noble hallmarks of your spiritual tradition that have led, and will continue to lead, the nation and the people through turbulent times to the haven of peace.”

He added:

“Our diversity in religious and ethical beliefs calls upon all of us to foster genuine fraternal dialogue and to give special consideration to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them”.

Had time permitted, mention could have made of the Church’s relationships with other religious communities such as the Jains, Baha’is and Zoroastrians, with whom I recently enjoyed a very pleasant evening. But now I must turn to the call to dialogue.

I could continue with references to other religious communities too. But I must move on to look more closely at what this dialogue entails.

What we learn is that dialogue demands an honest witnessing to one’s belief, and an attitude of profound willingness to listen to the belief of another. We have to engage in this dialogue with charity (NA2) and with humility. And we must do so because the witness it gives is an important factor in our search for peace and stability in our world and our society. It is a positive contribution to our society, showing that religious belief is a force for good, that religion is not inimical to our humanity, but springs from the quest for truth rooted in spirit of every human being. How important this is today, when so many denounce religious belief as divisive and demeaning.

Speaking in this country in September 2010, Pope Benedict reaffirmed our commitment to this task. He said: ‘Let me assure you that the Catholic Church follows the path of engagement and dialogue out of a genuine sense of respect. Catholics, both in Britain and throughout the world, will continue to work to build bridges of friendship to other religions, to heal past wrongs and to foster trust between individuals and communities.’ (St Mary’s, Twickenham, 17-9-10.)

Part Three: Religious Faith and Public Policy

I would now like to turn to my first practical application of the importance of inter-religious cooperation by again quoting Pope Benedict during his Visit to the UK.

Speaking in Westminster Hall he reflected on the proper place of religious belief within the political process. He praised our country’s ‘national instinct for moderation’ and described this land as ‘a pluralist democracy which places great value on freedom of speech, freedom of political affiliation and respect for the rule of law, with a strong sense of the individual’s rights and duties and of the equality of all citizens before the law.’ He went on to say that, within this tradition, each generation has to ask what are the demands that governments may reasonably impose upon its citizens, or, in Biblical language, what is owed to Caesar and what is owed to God. He pointed out that these questions take us directly ‘to the ethical foundations of civil discourse’, insisting that this is a crucial challenge for democracy for ‘if the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident.’ His illustration was weighty and telling. He said: ‘The inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems has been

illustrated all too clearly by the recent global crisis. There is widespread agreement', he added, 'that the lack of solid ethical foundation for economic activity has contributed to the grave difficulties now being experienced by millions of people throughout the world.'

The Pope pointed to the factors which ought to be at work when confronting the ethical implications of various policy proposals. 'The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation.'

This is a bold claim. But a great deal lies behind it: nothing less than the very search for meaning, which is an essential character of the human spirit distinguishing us from other animals. In Western civilization, for example, this search has borne many fruits in a rich philosophical tradition of over 2,500 years, going back to Aristotle, Plato and the pre-Socratics. Not content with the accumulation of facts alone, so vehemently advocated by Mr. Grangrind, we use our discursive faculty called "reason" as a key tool to try to grasp the underlying truth of our world and our own humanity. With respect to our humanity, reason discloses to us universal, objective and unchanging truths of the moral order. They are truths transcending historical and cultural conditions precisely because they are rooted in our very being. Knowledge of such truths directs our choices and actions so that we, as individuals and as a society, may flourish.

To give an example, we can reason that taking food and drink serves our own bodily health and our social well being. This is true in every culture, no matter what we eat and drink. This universal norm is often transgressed in our abuse of food and drink, which when taken in excess is widely recognized as morally wrong. Recognition of the underlying pattern of our nature and purpose of our actions gives rise to a moral code.

Even though accessible to human reason, the Catholic tradition, for one, considers our knowledge of such moral truths and our living by them, to be an active participation in divine law.

We forsake this tradition to our own impoverishment. But there is more.

It is this high regard for the dignity and power of reason which leads Catholicism, along with other religions I'm sure, to affirm that religion and reason are not opposed, but complement each other. Religion recognises that reason assists a deeper understanding of its own beliefs. Indeed, it can seem that religions have more faith in reason than certain trends in our contemporary culture. That said, unaided, reason's search for truth can be difficult. Here religion may assist reason. By exploring this two-way relationship between religion and reason, the place of our religious traditions in public debate, and the contribution they can make to the vitality and depth of ethical reflection in the formation of public policy, may be discerned.

Referring to this relationship between reason and religion, Pope Benedict spoke, first of all, of the purifying role of reason in religion. He maintained that distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism, which can create serious social

problems, arise when ‘insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion.’ Then he spoke of the role of religion within reason, saying: ‘Without the corrective supplied by religion reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take account of the full dignity of the person.’

This challenge posed by the Pope has been vividly illustrated in recent debate about the Government’s proposal to change the legal definition of marriage to accommodate same-sex civil partnerships. Defending the Government’s proposal, the Equalities Minister insisted that marriage ‘is owned neither by the state nor the Church...it is owned by the people’ as if this was an argument that removed the need for further discussion of the proposal’s ethical consequences.

On the contrary, there is a clear and constant argument from reason for defining marriage as being between a man and a woman, corresponding to the underlying pattern in our nature of the complementarity of male and female, their potential fertility and subsequent responsibility for the care of children.

The discussion we need here, as in many other matters, is not one of tradition, or of social consent, either old or new. It is an argument of a different kind: about our capacity to understand human nature in a philosophical sense and to derive guidance and principle from that understanding.

Religious traditions, then, can serve the common good not simply by repeating the fruit of their wisdom but by reasoned, principled argument and attentive dialogue with those who disagree if they are prepared to do so.

This is an urgent, although far from easy, task.

Part Four: Our Spiritual Quest

Another important part of our dialogue is our shared spiritual quest. If I may again turn to Pope Benedict speaking in Twickenham on 17 September 2010, he emphasized the ‘fundamental importance of this spiritual quest in which we are all engaged.’ He said:

‘The quest for the sacred is the search for the one thing necessary, which alone satisfies the longings of the human heart. In the fifth century, St. Augustine described that search in these terms: “Lord, you have created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”.’

I would like to comment on this quest simply by telling you about one person whose testimony inspires me. Her name is Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman, who made her spiritual journey in the most harrowing circumstances.

I have met her only through her writings. Yet they are so luminous that I have a sense of a far more personal knowledge. (cf ‘Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed’ Patrick Woodhouse 2006)

She was born in 1914 and grew up in Amsterdam, living within a dysfunctional family, without any explicit religious context, experiencing great emotional instability and a fairly chaotic sex and social life. Yet, in a two and a half year period from February 1941 to her death in November 1943, she came to a remarkable inner freedom and faith. She did so, initially, through a process of counselling and therapy through which she came to understand herself deeply. But the profound transformation within her came about through her discovery of the practice of silent contemplation, silent presence before the inner mystery of her life, which she came to recognise as God.

This is remarkable enough. But what is more astonishing is that she made that journey in the harsh circumstances of the Amsterdam at that time: during the relentless persecution of all Jews and during her work in the transit camp of Westerbork, where Jews were held for transfer to death in Auschwitz.

Her diaries and letters are a remarkable testimony to her inner journey of faith and to her inner strength which was never broken. Throughout her time of introspection and personal growth, Etty never wavered in her attention to those who were suffering. She was a daily angel of compassion and love in increasingly desperate circumstances. She rejected the possibility of escape for herself, choosing rather to stay with her people and face the certainty of death. On the contrary, she continued to exalt in the goodness of God even in the face of such utter degradation and death. Her final communication with us came when she herself was herded onto the death train, together with her parents and her brother. Then she sang with love and managed to thrust out of the cattle wagon one last message of hope in God.

In her writings she tells of the gradual way in which we became aware of and entered that inner space which is the place of our spiritual lives. She learned to be silent and still before herself and the reality of God. She spoke of it in these terms: "...time after time one must gather oneself together again around one's very centre. Herding together the disorderly flock of ...thoughts, emotions, sensations...like the good shepherd."

In this journey of inner discovery, she learned, as we must, to receive rather than describe and analyse. She learned the importance of our contemplative faculty alongside our reason, saying: "You must live and breathe with your soul....if you live by your mind alone yours is but a poor existence." Her daily effort, then, was expressed in this learned conviction: "I have assigned an ever larger dwelling place for You... the powerful centre which spreads its rays to the outermost boundaries."

There is so much we can learn from this young woman about the life of the spirit within us. But one thing has left an indelible impression on me. It is this.

Etty talks about a particular outward expression of this inner journey. She speaks about kneeling. She is not talking about kneeling in a church, for she never did so. It would seem that most of her kneeling was done in the bathroom. But she is so eloquent in finding and describing this outward expression of her inner contemplation, of her inner joy and freedom. Listen to some of her words about kneeling:

“It is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling. Sometimes, in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge....a gesture embedded in my body, needing to be expressed.....When I write these things down I still feel a little ashamed, as if I were writing about the most intimate of intimate matters. Much more bashful than if I had to write about my love life. But is there indeed anything as intimate as a man’s relationship to God?”

“Some time ago I said to myself, ‘I am a kneeler in training’. I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words.....except by a poet.”

When, on 4 July 1942, a new raft of regulations against the Jews in Amsterdam, she wrote: “I suddenly had to kneel down on the hard coconut matting in the bathroom, my head bowed so low that it nearly rested on my lap...I could remain like that for days, my body like the safe walls of a small cell, sheltering me right in its middle.”

She describes kneeling “as an expression of what is still a deeply searching spirit.” Kneeling becomes, for her, the outward expression of “allowing myself to be led not by anything on the outside but by what wells up from deep within me.”

Here, I think, is the beginning of a model of our common quest for holiness, a way of tutoring of the heart. And, in Etty, it bore much fruit.

This kind of prayer sustains the daily conviction that at the root of the human heart lie goodness and love.

It helps develop a personal sense of vocation, even destiny.

In Etty’s life, this prayer of the heart raised in her a readiness to bear sorrow, such that she could write: “Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due.”

And the same with compassion, a gift she never withdrew from those in need. The compassion, she said, which rises from such prayer shows that “there are no frontiers between suffering people”. In this way, in the prison camp and even on the train to Auschwitz she was able to overcome every sense of condemning others or hating them.

And then, even more remarkably, her prayer gave rise within her to a keener eye for beauty in so many things and places. Because of this inner dialogue she was always harkening, listening, to all reality. She wrote of the beauty of the flowers just beyond the perimeter of the prison camp – a beauty that would sustain her through the day. She even spoke of the fleeting glimpse of compassion she could detect in the eye of the hard and merciless prison guard, such that she nurtured a love and a prayer for him too.

Her inner life of prayer, then, bore fruit in a sense of the goodness of life, a sense of vocation, a readiness to bear sorrow, the gift of compassion and attentiveness to the hidden beauty of life. But that is not all.

The fruit of her prayer brought her to an eloquent and enlightening appreciation of the nature of God's presence in the world. As she struggled with the question of where was God in the midst of the holocaust she came to this proclamation: "God's chosen way is helplessness. This is the only way in which God can be with us – in God's own helplessness. In this way God helps us. God becomes a vulnerable presence to be looked after and cherished in the human heart." And "if we care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything."

She prayed:

"You cannot help us but we must help you and must defend Your dwelling place within us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, even at this late stage are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons into safekeeping instead of guarding you dear God. And there are those who want to put their bodies in safekeeping but who are nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings. And they say, 'I shan't let them get me into their clutches.' But they forget that no one is in their clutches who is in Your arms."

At moments such as these, I am struck how close she stands to the main messages of Christian revelation and how much she might serve as an inspiration to us all. She illustrates in her contemporary way, the importance of the contemplative aspect of human living that we stand in danger of losing. Yet this contemplative dimension, this sense of always standing before God, is what gives our lives their true depth, motivation and endurance.

Thank you for your patient attention. The beauty of our spiritual heritage, the importance of well structured dialogue between us, our part in public debate and our spiritual quest have been my topics in the exploration of faith today and our journey to God. I trust all I have said to the grace of God and to your gracious goodwill.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols
10 March 2012