

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE: A Challenge to the Unity of the Churches

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The Lecture: The St Thomas Unity Lecture is given every three years or so, a Lecturer being invited from India by the Friends of the Church in India. Here is a brief summary of it.

The Lecturer: *Dr Aruna Gnanadasan is co-ordinator of the Justice, Peace and Creation Team of the Women's Programme of the World Council of Churches with special responsibility to co-ordinate the Women's programme of the WCC. She is from the Church of South India and has much experience in the struggle for justice for women across many fields of rural and urban life and is an advocate for that cause in national and international arenas, theologically, ecumenically and politically. She is married and has two sons. And, with remarkable willingness, she gave the lecture in Edinburgh, Birmingham, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Wrexham and Carmarthen*

An Outline:

1) The Context: Religious violence - a world phenomenon; in India - anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu; the recent causes; are Christians wise so vehemently to assert their Christian identity? Government and police attitudes; a poignant poem of a young Hindu 's appalled reaction to militant Hindu religiously motivated violence.

2) The Challenge to the unity of the churches: urgent need to act in reconciliation, witness to the wholeness of God; amid powers that have no self-criticism, acknowledge Christian brokenness; in response to the Hindutva smear that Syrian churches are "indigenous", others "missioned" and "foreign", the Church is challenged to find its own unity.

3) All Religions speak peace . . . then why are they at the centre of violence? Urgent need to intensify inter-religion relatedness and recognition that all religions have at centre a spirituality of non-violence. But in globalised world and drift to monoculture from the West there is need to counter the response of aggressive fundamentalism. After Sept. 11th - too easy to see all Muslims as terrorist. And, for some, violence = virtue, hence suicide bombers. Fatal for religions to compete i.e. which is best? Religions challenged to discover their potential for creating harmony.

4) Recognising violence in all its form. "Whatever 'violates' anotherinfringing upon or disregarding or abusing or denying that other, whether physical harm is done or not = violence. On economic violence: gross poverty in the world but to say "poverty breeds violence" and must be eradicated is to demonise the poor and to find excuse for what amounts to violence in purporting to change their lot.

5) Recognising our own complicity in violence. The Bible has much language and story of violence and the western church has used violence - the

missionary church associated with imperialism - George Bush's use of "crusade" - there is current language of a "new imperialism" based on a "defensive motive" e.g. "liberation" of Afghanistan - but how many deaths there? - "a crusade for the US to solidify world empire" ? - The churches are yet to address this challenge and reflect on its theological significance. And still there is violence within the body of the churches e.g. discriminated communities, discrimination against women. What of "the violence of the Cross and the insistence that atonement is related to an act of aggression" this in an already violence-filled world?

6) Moving to an alternative agenda- from conversion to healing. Consider the violent language of some evangelism, fundamentalist branding of people of other religions as lost. Conversion of the world to Christ - a key concept of mission - seemingly no possibility of life in God through other faith traditions. Has the advance of mission to do with numbers? in a fragmented bleeding world an alternative Christian world view is needed: working with people of all faiths for healing and reconciliation.

7) The task ahead: a) Intra-Christian dialogue - "That they may all be one" and more questions about aggressive evangelism - rather: proclamation of the loving, just and compassionate God we follow. b) More vigorous inter-religious dialogue and align ourselves with other communities of resistance - Three-fold evangelising role: i) experience solidarity with people of all faiths witnessing to common spirituality. ii) Reveal Christian uniqueness going deeply into heart of our faith and proclaiming Jesus as the "pact" that God makes with all who live amid the violence of this world, particularly the most vulnerable. iii) We have yet to become the church of Jesus Christ in our world today through actions of healing and reconciliation between all peoples and faiths in commitment to overcoming violence.