

***Challenged by Ignorance:
Responding to the Strangers in our Midst***

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Selected Papers

BEING, IDENTITY AND BELIEF

A Christian Basis for Pursuing Racial Justice

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Introduction

The challenge for any society divided along the lines of ethnicity or people group (race) (See figure 1), religion, sexual orientation, gender and culture, is the recognition that politically, economically, socially and spiritually, that society becomes and remains poorer. Yet, these are essential differences which make up the identity of each person.

As Christians, whose existence is fixed by faith in a loving God, we battle against the overt and hidden causes and forms of racism. If this endeavour is to be redemptive and sustainable, two principles are vital: One, it is imperative that we resist the mild form of 'neo-colonialism' of merely 'doing-on-behalf-of' marginalized people, despite its importance, and harness the strength of our oneness in Christ as the basis for 'identifying-with' them in all our work to defeat racism. You see, the victim and the perpetrator of racism are fellow human beings. Two, as a consequence, we must take seriously three core features of life which inspire and determine the depth and quality of our work. These are: Being, Identity and Belief, considered as possessing *essential* and *existential* characteristics.

I intend to show here, on the one hand, that Being, Identity and Belief constitute our *essential* nature, and are foundational to our struggle for justice and the defeat of racism. This structure comprises core features because Being, Identity and Belief embody without condition our *essential* distinctive differences, yet respects our unity, which is rooted in God. That is, we recognise the fact that each person exists in common with, and belongs to the nature of the whole human family, having been created in the image of God.

ETHNICITY OR RACE?

Scientists have increasingly questioned the concept of 'race', despite its popular usage in the public discourse. It is convincingly argued that the difference *between* different people groups to which 'race' refers accounts approximately for only 5%, whilst the differences which occur *within* people groups, is reckoned to be approximately 85%. (See Stephen Cohen on Ethnicity, Class and Immigration)

Being

Image and 'God-talk', that is, the truth we recognise and speak, but seem to fail to practice, often hark back to or prefigure our belief that human beings have their essential being in the likeness and Being of God (*Genesis 1:26*), notably as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Our created likeness which is manifested in Christ also reveals our true being, or that which commonly unites all humanity, its essential validity: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation.' (*Colossians 1:15*). It is first in the being of God, therefore, that all human beings have ultimate worth and validity, and in Him human beings come to their fullest and truest meaning. Christian teaching and moral precept oblige us, therefore, to appropriate this self-understanding. If we maintain what is usually considered a Euro-centric view of the world, where one ethnic group (See Figure 2) takes power and dominion over all others, we ultimately guarantee the continuation of segregation and the disregard of powerless and marginalized people, falsely, as not belonging.

Being and belonging

It is morally, theologically and anthropologically acceptable, therefore, that we must not merely regard black and minority ethnic people as 'deserving' respect and inclusion, but reject racism as the sin¹ of exclusion, disrespect and 'segregation' by grasping and cherishing the fact that all God's children inherently share in the dignity of the Being of God. The great American Christian leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr Martin Luther King Jr.² understood this well, and cites an abundance of evidence against the idea of inferior and superior 'races'. History had perpetuated and supported this idea, including many like the great Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume has had the greatest positive impact on modern intellectual history concerning religion and culture; but he is also known to have remarked: 'I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There was never a civilised nation of any other complexion than white...' (*Essay on National Characters*, 1753). It is on these ideas that white supremacists ideologies and all current forms of racism are based. But contrary to the superiority-inferiority myth, as Christians we must affirm our intrinsic unity as people who 'belong' to God, and as such, to His Church, and that all are fully one with human community. This is the *essential* reality of Being.

Then, on the other hand, it becomes necessary to deal with the *existential* questions of every day life: our options, preferences, the 'deep yearnings' for meaning and participation, for just dealings in accessing education and public services, and for specialisation. These are often cultural choices people make, and could be understood fundamentally as secondary to the essence of what it means to be and belong, but they are necessary for maintaining our vitality. Being and belonging in a society divided along ethnic or cultural lines, however, presuppose and demands the reconciliation of all peoples, ethnic groups so divided.

THE WORD 'ETHNIC'

In reality the word 'ethnic' refers to *all* people because *all* people have ethnicity. In other words, each person belongs to a people group: Asian, white, black, all have a particular heritage. In order to be careful not to reinforce exactly what we are trying to defeat - racism and discrimination - African, African Caribbean, mixed heritage and Asian peoples in Britain are understood as minorities, simply in terms of numbers. White people in Britain are the majority. Whilst people prefer self-definition, 'minority ethnic', with the emphasis on 'minority' respects those minority identities because it emphasises 'minority', rather than 'ethnicity'. To emphasize ethnicity is to deny it to white people, and to use it negatively to segregate minority ethnicities from white ethnicities.

Consequently, even though it is widely used, 'ethnic minority' should be avoided as it places the emphasis wrongly on the ethnicity of African, African Caribbean, and Asian and mixed heritage people as the only ones that possess ethnicity. As such 'ethnic minority', for all intents and purposes means someone that is marginalized, excluded and unwanted in society, because those terms have attracted grossly negative connotations for minority ethnic groups in Britain.

'Ethnic group', 'ethnic community', 'the ethnics' 'ethnic minorities', 'ethnic people' as references to minorities in Britain are all linguistically incorrect, socially offensive, and does nothing to help our case against racism and racial discrimination.

To be reconciled

Recognition of, and identification with people of minority ethnic heritages can only be genuinely upheld and sustained when each individual is understood in his or her *essential* nature, potentiality and promise. The denial of this leads to exclusion and racism. Institutional racism is exclusion on the basis of colour or culture by processes or practices. In the churches, where black and minority ethnic people adhere in large numbers, institutional racism is clearly manifested by the lack of black and minority ethnic leaders at the 'highest levels'. While some may not choose leadership responsibility, many may have yearnings or the call of God and the skills or potential for such positions in ministry; but uses of

¹ Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Redeeming the Time*, (CTBI, London: 2003), p. 4ff.

² James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope*, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., (Harper San Francisco: 1986), p.211. (Hereafter, ATH).

power in some institutions and churches still prohibit progress, and the need for repentance and reconciliation remains critical. The acceptance of our oneness in dignity under God, and the practice of 'respect and belonging' can assist the church's redemptive purpose also as a single act of *reparation*, not necessarily monetary reparation, but the recognition of unity of being and identity, which could lead to genuine reconciliation.

Identity

Identity is found and validated in Christological concreteness. Here, the Person and Work of Christ, not only underscores the identity of human beings founded upon the likeness, but offers renewal to that identity (1 Corinthians 5:17). We are human beings commonly because God created us thus, and we are renewed as Christ re-established our new identity in his Being, God's self-giving. But economic, social and political factors have been used to promote, falsely, the notion of separate *essential* identities.

The problem emerges when black and minority ethnic people are defined in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. This is a pathology that seeks to dehumanise a person in order to justify inhuman and degrading treatment of that person. From a British perspective, English people defined the Irish in relation to national identity. For her Doctoral thesis at the University of Sheffield Department of Sociological Studies, Nicola Piper conducted extensive research on this issue, pointing to the English conception of the Irish as a 'race' based on the nineteenth century notion of 'scientific racism'. Scientific racism referred to a 'separate physical type of people with a range of negative social and cultural characteristics.'³ Discrimination on these grounds simply denied people the reality of an identity common to all people.

As human beings we are aware of our *existential*, ethnic and cultural identities, which can be changeable, but our essential identity is rooted in the Being of God, who identifies with us in His Person as revealed in Jesus Christ. Human beings in their essential identity are not distinct therefore from each other, nor do the existential (religious, cultural etc.) character diminishes or damages what is essential. The plumber, surgeon, painter of works of art, or sewer may be matters of cultural choice, and cultures are fluid, but each person shares immutably in a common identity. Each may have a different ethnicity: Asian, African, African Caribbean, white, mixed heritage, but each shares that common identity. This is vital to the Christian belief system (see Acts 17:24-28), and must inform why and how we work for racial justice.

Belief

It is of course essential for Christians actively to express their faith, their belief; this expression constitutes expression as an aspect of their essential being and identity, e.g., a Christian may be female and Asian. Yet, belief here does not require a gradation of value in terms of this identity, not least of course, ethnic value. But one may also be Christian and artist; here identity does not fully constitute the essence of what it means to be, because art is choice and changeable, and being and likeness is founded in the being and likeness of God. The basic form of belief in this regard is an understanding of *all* our created nature in relation to the nature of God.

Moreover, as image and belief, being, in practice, constitutes the whole person; but personhood is not conditional upon the expressions in our choices in art or careers. Racism emerges often from fear, but as King stressed, white people must master fear, and 'depend not only on their commitment to Christian love, but also on the Christ-like love which the Negro [black and minority ethnic person] generates towards them.'⁴ When we believe, we take seriously the tenets of our faith, not only that we love God and are our brother's and sister's keeper, but we love human beings as we love our *essential* selves, not always our existential wanderings (sometimes we hate our own actions or choices – the non-essential self).

³ Nicola Piper, *Racism, Nationalism, and Citizenship*, (Ashgate, Aldershot: 1998), p. 59.

⁴ James T Washington, *ATH*, p. 514.

When combating racism, it is important, therefore, to acknowledge that racism is a challenge to God's authority, to our being and identity. There is ample evidence for this challenge, which is rooted in modern philosophical and cultural history, as expounded, for example, in the works of the Enlightenment agnostic philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. He justified his own unbelief and negatively influenced Christian history by saying: 'Man no longer says, "I shall" because of God, but he says, "I will because I will."' (*Will to Power*). This is not only a denial of God, but also a repudiation of the dominion God gave human beings over things of the earth, which Christian theologian, Stephen Wright, recognises. He warns: 'Instead of being ruler under God, the world rules man. What should be shared dominion has become dominion of oppression and subservience.' (*Growing into God*).

Conclusion

It is my view that, taken together, Being, Identity and Belief, therefore, renders racism and racial discrimination, or the division or gradation of our essential identity fundamentally un-Christian, illogical and fragmentary. It is a denial of our essence; for all men and women are created equal. Racism flies in the face of this truth. Being, Identity and Belief enable us to build on our common identity in defiance of racism, and share the responsibility for this task. It is essential.

All forms of racism are ultimately unsustainable because they are not only evil, but racism tries to subvert the essential identity of *all* human beings. We as Christians must embrace difference and be 'richer' by undergoing a measure of cultural integration, recognise our human interdependence, promote social and economic redistribution, and pursue ethnic harmony, so that our Being is being-in-love-for-one-another'. This does not entail 'giving up our identity', which on the one hand is impossible.



Challenged by Ignorance: Responding to the Strangers in our Midst

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Introduction

It is obvious that the demographic, social, and cultural complexion of Ireland – North and South – has dramatically changed over the last decade, especially in the South. As an African visiting Ireland for the first time twenty years ago, one of the things that struck me most was the scarcity of black peoples, for example, on the streets of this island.

Obvious difference has now become part of the texture of daily life here. At work, in the street and on the television screen, we are regularly confronted with peoples from all over the world whose faith, culture, accent, skin colour, customs and histories are unlike ours.

The challenges that this reality bring us are as numerous, subtle, and complex as the diversity of needs, aspirations, and expectations represented by all the peoples that now populate this island.

Identity excludes. For every ‘we’ there is a ‘them’ - the people who are not like us, the different others. Challenge by difference is not a new reality, not least on this island. Recent demographic realities here have just made the challenge perhaps more complex and intense than it ever has been. Whether or not we experience the challenge as enriching would depend on how we respond to it.

So this conference comes at the right time. Reflecting together on its topic, “Challenged by Difference: Threat or Enrichment” will, I hope, encourage us to respond more positively to the challenges presented us by the presence of complex differences on our island.

“Everyone looks at the world from a different perspective”, says a television advert.⁵

Each one of you here today probably has their own ideas and views on the topic of this conference, and perhaps even suggestions about how we might choose to approach addressing its concerns as you see and understand them. You will have an opportunity to share those views during the conference. For my part, I have decided to reflect on the topic: **“Challenged by Ignorance: Responding to the Strangers in our Midst.”**

I am doing so because to my mind, what will ultimately decide how we experience this challenge – whether as threat or enrichment - is how much we know or want to know the different others in our midst vis-à-vis our own taken-for-granted selves and how open and willing we are to discover and learn from those different others and of ourselves.

To do that, I will begin by drawing our attention to a parable of Jesus which I believe unveils an attitude which is common to humanity as a whole and which I believe is informed by ignorance.

From that broad and universal point of departure, I will narrow the focus, by illustrating in a very specific way, how the ignorance I identify in the parable has been demonstrated in the last (about) 300 years in the relationship between white and non-white people.

That history and the parable will, I hope, provide us with a background against which we can reflect on and assess Ireland’s general response to strangers, especially non-white strangers. Finally, I will go on to suggest what a better way forward of doing this might entail.

⁵ HSC bank advert on ITV

Before I go any further, let me make a confession.

I am a preacher, and I belong to a group of people on this island who arguably stand out as most different from the rest because of our skin colour, and so experience discrimination perhaps more so than any other group of people.

That combination, I suppose, is not one that makes it possible for me to deal with the topic of this conference in a detached and disinterested way. So if and when I begin to preach at you, I hope you would understand why, and do not take it personally.

Now that I have declared my true colours, let me start addressing the topic of this conference. And, dare I say, concerns about colour are not marginal to the challenge of difference we are faced with today in Ireland.

So, first then, the challenge of ignorance in the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

As we consider this parable, it is good for us to bear in mind what internationally acclaimed New Testament scholar Howard Marshall says about it. “The story”, he says, “is unusual in being a real story and not a ‘comparison’ such as is usually found in the parables. It goes beyond being a story when Jesus claims to know God’s verdict on the two men.”⁶

I. Challenged by Ignorance: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men... or even like this tax collector” [Lk.18:11]

Are all human beings not ultimately the same: embodied creatures, who feel hunger, thirst, fear, and pain; who reason, hope, dream, and aspire; who are vulnerable? Do not all human beings as individuals, groups, and societies have their shortcomings and strengths? Was the Pharisee in this story any different? Granted, as he himself claimed, he was a good man, was he also not a self-righteousness man, uncharitable in his representation of other fellow human beings?

In uncritically assuming that he was not like other men, was this man being truthful? Was he also revealing his ignorance of the true and total reality of what it means to be human? Did his being a human being not imply that he was like all other human beings in every sense of the word?

These are some questions that this man’s assertion about himself might raise in one’s mind.

But was this man also not right in recognising and saying that he was not like other men? After all, he was a Pharisee. And, like other Pharisees, he was intent on keeping the Jewish religious tradition meticulously and scrupulously pure.

So, the Pharisee was, after all, what he said he was. He was unlike others who were different from him - others who were not Pharisees - and so did not necessarily see their life’s goal as one of guarding and preserving Jewish orthodoxy.

This acknowledgement of his uniqueness, and by implication the uniqueness of the group he represented vis-à-vis other people in Jewish society and beyond, is something that the Pharisee should be congratulated for. In acknowledging his own particularity, this man put his finger on a reality that describes and is a part and parcel of all human existence – the need for boundaries of distinction.

⁶ The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, (1978:677)

The creation of boundaries of distinctions between oneself - as group or individual – and others is not bad in itself. It is, in fact, necessary and essential to life. As Miroslav Volf⁷ rightly points out,

Without boundaries we will be able to know only what we are fighting against but not what we are fighting for...The absence of boundaries creates non-order, and non-order is not the end of exclusion but the end of life... in the absence of boundaries, we are unable to name what is excluded (what is not acceptable). ... Vilify all boundaries, pronounce every discrete identity oppressive, put the tag 'exclusion' on every stable difference – and you will have aimless drifting instead of clear-sighted agency, haphazard activity instead of moral engagement and accountability and, in the long run, a torpor of death instead of a dance of freedom.

Yes, the Pharisee was not like other men because he did not do the evil that other men did: steal, murder, commit adultery, and so on. Indeed, his own sin, though he did not know, was called by other names: self-righteousness, pride, self-centredness, and critical spirit.

That is not all. He described his goodness in terms of: obedience to the law, discipline in fasting, and generous in paying tithes; but not in terms of humility or acknowledgement of need – both of which constituted the Tax Collector's 'goodness'. Yes, in these – the difference in names of their sins and virtues they had - there were boundaries between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Also, the Pharisee, unlike the other men he condescendingly condemned, was the only one who was not aware of his own shortcomings. But neither was the Tax Collector aware of his own strength for which Jesus recommended him - humility. That was another significant boundary that divided these two men.

Add to that the fact that one was a Pharisee - with all that meant - and the other was not; and you see how very right the Pharisee was in saying that he was not like other men. Important boundaries distinguished him from the other men he had in mind.

But for the Pharisee to move from acknowledging the existence of boundaries between him and others – to move from saying "I am different from others and cherish my particularity" – to wishing, at least by implication or insinuation, that all other boundaries, particularities, and ways of being different from his should not exist, was to deny to others what he believed, and rightly so, was essential for true humanity.

It was to say (1) that he was ignorant of the fact that those he roundly condemned also had invaluable human values he and the way of life he represented did not have; (2) that he was ignorant of the shortcomings of his own particularities. And, finally, (3) it was to say that he was ignorant, as I have already noted, that he too, like the Tax Collector and others, was a person with needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

For, while there were differences between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the differences were not in **what** kind of people they were, but in **how** they were **what** they were. Both represented true humanity in which 'fair is foul and foul is fair'.

The recognition of this would have freed them both from any delusions of total goodness and so self-righteousness (on the part of the Pharisee), or of total depravity and so self-depreciation (on the part of the Tax Collector). Evil is among the good, and good among the evil. The strangeness we see in others that make us discriminate against them, is a strangeness that also resides within us⁸, if we cared to look for it. This parable of Jesus clearly demonstrates this.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Jesus put his finger on what I believe is the perennial issue at the heart of human responses to other humans beings as different: the

⁷ Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996: 63-4

⁸ Kristeva, Julia (1990), Strangers to Ourselves [translated by Leon S. Roudiez]. New York: Columbia University Press

uncritical acceptance of our own particularities as normal and essential while we seek to deny or ignore or even label other people's boundaries as abnormal, and wish, consciously or otherwise, that their own differences should give way to our own.

Taking this stance, we (1) display our ignorance of the weaknesses that might be present in our own taken-for-granted selves, worldviews, beliefs and practices; and (2) display our ignorance of the strengths and values that other people's worldviews, beliefs, and practices may have that we could benefit from.

Jesus recommended the self-view of the Tax Collector not, I would suggest, because he was better or worse than the Pharisee in actual fact; but because he had the attitude of mind and heart that in the end, mattered most.

His disposition characterised him as a man open towards new ways of seeing and being. In this man reposed the humble recognition that he is nowhere near being what he could be as a human being created in the image of God. In this man was real hope for change for the better. You see, we never begin to be good till we can feel and say that we are bad.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, no longer saw anything good in different others to emulate; at least not in the Tax Collector whom he perceived as being below him; perhaps not even in God because he sounded totally self-liberated and self-dependent. He had arrived so to speak. His standard was himself, and no other. The Pharisee saw himself as the master exemplar that everyone else must imitate. Such a person would find no reason to learn from others, or change for the better.

This Pharisee, I would say, had the stuff from which ethnic, national, religious, gender, age, economic, cultural, political, and skin colour discriminations, exclusions, and conflicts are made. The stuff is called 'superiority complex'. It is the "I am better than you" syndrome that has always plagued this world and continues to do so. It is the attitude that says unless you are like me, or until you become like me, I am not prepared to value you as a human being like me, nor the way of life you represent.

Backed up with money, military might, policy-making power, and control, this prejudiced Pharisee had in him the seeds from which injustice of every kind is born: slavery, colonisation, the holocaust, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, sectarianism, the oppression and exploitation of women and non-white people, and religious intolerance in our world.

I will now go on to reflect in a very general way on how the last about 500 hundred years of white people's relations with the rest of the world illustrate the ignorance I have suggested lay at the heart of this parable.

II. Challenged by Ignorance: the White and Non-White Peoples Divide

Yes, I know that our thoughts now are on today's Ireland and what we hope it would become tomorrow. But I also strongly believe that it is important for us NOT to overlook the past, because the present realities we want to focus on, I suggest, have a lot to do with the past.

In the words of Edmund Burke, "People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors."⁹ Among my people, we say that "If you don't know where you are going, know where you come from." Why? Because knowledge of where you come from will help instruct you about where you should be going.

While every individual and people have the power to discriminate against and exclude difference, and do often exercise it, it is important in this conference to acknowledge that the record of white people's

⁹ (1907:109), Works IV. London: World's Classic Edition

use of their conversational, material, and military power to discriminate against, exclude, and exploit non-white people is arguably unsurpassed in modern history.¹⁰

Although I could go further back, let me begin at 1770 and bring you right up to the present.

Listen, for example, to David Hume – philosopher and one time British colonial officer who wrote in 1770:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most barbarous of whites, ... have still something eminent about them... Such uniform and constant difference could not happen ...if nature had not made original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.¹¹

Immanuel Kant¹², a contemporary of Hume, even went as far as creating a hierarchical chart classifying human beings into different races with white people on the top of his scale and non-white people at the bottom. For him the ideal skin colour was ‘white’ to which others are superior or inferior as they appropriate the white. In his opinion, like that of Hume, non-white people were therefore, inferior to white people. Kant even ascribed to skin colour (white or black) the evidence of rational (and therefore human) capacity or lack of it.

Georg Wilhelm Hegel¹³ was no different from Hume and Kant in his view of non-white people. He, in fact, denied full humanity to non-white (especially black) people, even recommending and justifying the practice of colonialism on the grounds that it benefited Africa because Europe imparted Africa with reason, ethic, political order, culture, and mores and therefore gave Africa history which Africa, otherwise, did not have. Africa, he argued, is a wasteland of lawlessness and paganism waiting for European soldiers and missionaries to conquer it and impose order and morality on her.

So, while the trade and practices of transatlantic slavery were predicated on denial of full humanity to black people as Hume and Kant argued, colonialism was predicated on the metaphysical denial of the historicity of the existence of non-white people as Hegel suggested. Karl Marx’s views were not different in this regard.

Yet, credible authorities¹⁴, contrary to Hume, Hegel, Kant, Marx’s views of non-white peoples and their societies, tell us that India, China, and Japan were all highly developed civilisations before the age of colonialism, as were the Inca and Mayan civilisations in Latin America and the kingdoms of Ghana, Songay, Mali, Benin, Nyakusa, and Mwanamutapa in Africa, to name but a few.

That is not all. Science today, through the first mapping of the human genome, has also corroborated the biblical stance that there is only one human race. There are also good evolutionary anthropological indications now that we human beings are most probably all originally African.¹⁵ There is now sufficient scientific evidence to suggest that the differences in the physical features of human beings exist only in the level of tissues, cells, and molecules – distinctions that are quite insignificant.

¹⁰ Mazrui, Ali. A (1986: 301ff), *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. London: BBC Publications

¹¹ “On National Character: An essay on the nature and immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism” quoted in Eze, Chukwudi Emmanuel, ed.(1997:11,18), *Post Colonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers

¹² see his essay, “On the Varieties of Different Races of Men” quoted in *Ibid* 7

¹³ In his “Lectures on Philosophy” and “Lectures on the Philosophy of Right” quoted in *Ibid* 8

¹⁴ Mazrui, Ali. A (1986), *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. London: BBC Publications; Davidson, Basil (1966), *Africa: History of a Continent*. New York: Macmillan; (1969), *The African Genius: An Introduction to African Cultural and Social History*. Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown & Co.; (1978), *Discovering Africa’s Past*. London: Longman; Hope, Anne & Sally Timmel (1984:8f), *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers III*. Gweru: Mambo Press

¹⁵ Fr. O’Mahony, Donal, “The Role of the Churches” in Farrell, Fintan & Philip Watt eds., (2001:170) *Responding to Racism in Ireland*. Dublin: Veritas

That is not all. Colonial brutality, oppression, and exploitation and western missionary patronising intolerance towards other peoples beliefs and practices were obvious proofs that the white civilisers' claims that brutishness, savagery, and ignorance were the exclusive domain of non-white people was in fact a lie. And, today, we know that white people, like non-white people, neither have a monopoly on godliness or godlessness, nor on morality or immorality.

Where then did these notions about non-white people come from? They came from ignorance and the desire to subjugate and plunder non-white people's resources, backed by military might, in order to create and establish economic and cultural superiority. The transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, early western christianising efforts at labelling other peoples as 'savages', 'backward' and 'heathens', to portray them as the kind of people Europeans were not, bear witness to this desire and its fulfilment.

As is often the case, "We exclude not simply because we like the way things are...or because we hate the way they are...but because we desire what others have. More often than not, we exclude because in a world of scarce resources and contested power we want to secure possessions and wrest the power from others ... we want to be at the centre and be there alone, single-handedly controlling [others].¹⁶ And, often, we use ideas and force to achieve our aims.

Volf has identified 3 forms of exclusion: (1) *elimination* through killing or assimilation; (2) *domination* by assigning others the status of inferior beings; and (3) *abandonment* by keeping others at a safe distance so that their dehumanised bodies can make no immoderate claims on us.¹⁷ All three forms of exclusion took place in this history of white people's relationship with non-white people, and still take place.

At the heart of the views about non-white people and actions towards them was/is the very questionable assumption that there is only one way of being and one form of truth that mattered, and that all other ways and truths had to be assimilated to this one way. A view informed by the enlightenment and the modernism it gave birth to, it had its earliest formulations in Plato's philosophy. That philosophy had as its single most powerful view the idea that reality - the essence of things - is universal.¹⁸ It believed that:

Plurality and heterogeneity must give way to homogeneity and unity. One people, one culture, one language, one book, one goal; what does not fall under this all-encompassing "one" is ambivalent, polluting and dangerous. It must be removed. We want a pure world and push the 'others' out of our world; we want to be pure ourselves and eject "otherness" from within ourselves ... the outer worlds of our families, neighbourhoods, and nations. It is a dangerous programme, governed by a logic that reduces, ejects, and segregates.¹⁹

In its more benign form, it said to different others: "you can live, survive, even thrive, among us, if you become like us; we will let you keep and or enjoy your life, if you give up your identity."²⁰

Individual, institutional, and cultural colour prejudices, and discriminations experienced by non-white people from the hands of white people in the last about 500 hundred years have their roots in this idea and history.

In it, difference was seen not as an opportunity for a person or group of people to learn from and enlarge their understanding of what it means to be human, but as a threat to the 'true' way of seeing and being that should be got rid of.

Ignorance played a big role here - ignorance of the fact that as members of the human race every action of ours that dehumanises one human being, even if in the name of making our own lot better,

¹⁶ Volf, *ibid* 78

¹⁷ *Ibid* 75

¹⁸ Sack, Jonathan (2002: 49), *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations*. London: Continuum Books

¹⁹ Volf, *ibid* 74

²⁰ *Ibid* 75

dehumanises all of humanity, including those who dehumanise others. **But it is also perfectly reasonable to argue that sometimes we label and demonise others not because we do not know better, but because we refuse to know what is obvious and choose to know what serves our interests.**

We may like to argue that things are different today. But before jumping to that conclusion, let us ask ourselves a few questions.

(1) Apart from the fact that our way of talking about other people today is more diplomatic and politically correct, are things really different?

(2) What, for example, really lies at the heart of accusations of neo-colonialism, or unfair trade relations with the South?

(3) What assumptions inform our labelling of other peoples and parts of the world today as underdeveloped?

(4) Is it not the case that we still assume our way of life - be it political, social, religious, economic, or cultural - as the best and what all peoples need in order to be valued as equals with us?

Think of the pictures you have often seen of non-white peoples on your television screens.

(6) What messages do they carry about them? Negative? Positive?

(7) When last, for example, did you see an advert on your television screen telling you about the skills, abilities, wisdom, resources and resourcefulness of non-white peoples being talked about – unless when they play football or run races for us? Even then, non-white peoples often suffer racist slurs in the process.

As you think of those pictures, I want you to bear in mind that the media, along with education and religion, is one of the things that determine what we think and believe about the world and people. And negative images of non-white peoples - ritualistically presented as normal – no doubt, have negatively influenced many ordinary white people's thinking and relating to non-white people over the last 500 years, even if they are not often aware of it.

Our negative media images of non-white peoples have helped in no small way to reinforce, for example, our 'black babies' attitude towards them.

(8) With this attitude towards the rest of the world and ways of relating with others, should there be any surprise that non-white peoples in our world today are often treated by many white people as second class human beings, and their value systems as less important ways of life?

(9) With this posture of white people towards the rest, why would any white person be expected to accord equal respect, regard and treatment to a people whom white people have often represented in their speeches, writings, media, and arts as not nearly as good, educated, wealthy, healthy, honest, and skilled as they are?

What am I trying to say? I am trying to say that in the thoughts, works, and words about other peoples in much of the last 500 years, white people have sanctioned negative and self-righteous responses towards non-white people. They have sent out the message that it is right to ride the high horses of moral and social rectitude, falsely distancing themselves from the rest of humanity as though they are, like the Pharisee, wholly different from the rest.

That is why Shalini Sinha, an Indian woman, born in Canada, married to an Irish man and now living in Ireland questions notions of culture in isolation from how cultures relate across power. She writes:

I have grown up in two different cultures. One holds power over the other. It dominates and dictates how the other is seen. My Indian culture is considered backward, restrictive, primitive. When I tell people I study women's studies, I have been told at least once, 'Is that because you have an Indian culture but grew up in Canada and so can see how oppressed Indian women are?' Rather than being the 'best of both worlds' my experience of growing up within two different cultures is used against me to oppress my people. Western culture is seen as 'normal', 'civilised', even 'liberated'. It sees itself as the majority, even though it is not. It is not simply an issue of two different cultures, It is a matter of one culture having power over the other. One dominating the other. One determining how the other will be seen. One taken so much for granted, it is barely acknowledged as culture – culture being something that is biased, holding a particular world-view, based on ideas and assumptions, imbedded in mythical stories, but held up as truth. We can no longer talk simply about cultures. We must be honest about how it is those cultures relate across power.²¹

The record of white people's exclusionary attitude and actions towards non-white peoples especially in the last about 500 years underlines the lasting damaging effects discriminatory attitudes and actions have on relationships with other peoples especially when those who do the discrimination have economic and military power over those they discriminate against.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting in anyway that non-white people have not had any positive experience in their relations with white people over the last 300 or so years. In fact, over those years, white people have done much good work for non-white peoples as Christian and secular missionaries, and also as individuals in relationship with other non-white individuals. All I am saying is that "the harm the good do", legitimised by the myth of spreading the light of civilisation "is the most harmful harm."²² This is so not least because working to include others in our light often also becomes an exercise in excluding what we see as their darkness, blinded by whatever good we believe we have to do.

I will now briefly consider how Ireland is related to this history of the divide between white and non-white peoples.

III. Challenged by Ignorance: Ireland's Share in this Legacy of the White and Non-white Divide

Ireland has not been an innocent neutral onlooker in this long process of excluding and exploiting, especially, non-white people.

Yes, Ireland never politically colonised other peoples. But Irish people were often the foot soldiers of British colonisation of other nations. Irish missionaries were responsible for a religious and cultural colonisation of African peoples arguably unsurpassed by other Western peoples. Also, the part played by Irish-Americans in racist discrimination against black Americans is very well documented,²³ granted competition for scarce resources was sometimes responsible for this. *How the Irish became White*, the title of Noel Ignatiev's book in which he documents that history is suggestive of how the Irish themselves were ethnically discriminated against by other white Europeans at that time.

²¹ "Culture? I will tell you what culture is! Notes from the life of an Indian woman, born in Canada, living in Ireland." Paper presented at the Imagining Conference in University College Dublin in 1999

²² Nietzsche, Friedrich (1979:100), *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One is.* ? Translated by R. H. Hollingdale. London: Penguin. Quoted by Volf, *ibid* 61

²³ Ignatiev, Noel (1995), *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge; see also Onkey, Lauren (1999), "A Melee and a Curtain": Black-Irish Relations in Ned Harrigan's *The Mulligan Guard Ball* (and the works he cited). <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v4il/onkey.htm>; Lott, Eric (1993), *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford UP; Roediger, David (1991), *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso

Not only that. The Irish State's historical record of welcoming non-white and non-Catholic peoples in Ireland is not encouraging.²⁴

Recent developments in immigration to Ireland has given fresh opportunities to Irish people to continue exercising their power of exclusion of unwanted strangers in their midst. In Southern Ireland today, for example, new residents are the main target of Irish xenophobia and considerable humiliation and exploitation, especially if they are non-white. It has become quasi-official policy to keep out as many of them as possible as they are deemed to be a 'burden on society'. Black Africans, more so than others, are the target of this policy.

A recent Central Statistics Office Survey in the Republic of Ireland within the last two years found that black and ethnic minority people reported the highest rates of discrimination in the work place, in seeking employment, and in the provision of services, 40% of whom claimed the discrimination was based on race. Even with the Irish guest workers' system, the greatest discrimination is reserved for non-EU workers.²⁵ Less skilled workers of this group of people are even treated worse.

Outside institutional discrimination, many individual Irish people also respond negatively to strangers in their midst. Stories of foreigners of all nations, especially non-white people, being called names, physically assaulted in the streets, forced out of their homes by threats and intimidation, insulted on public transport, turned away from jobs because of their skin colour or country of origin are not uncommon in Southern Ireland today.

Northern Ireland has not really proved any better in the exercise of her power to exclude difference from her midst. Yes, her sectarian history is the most obvious example of this reality. But that must not be allowed to overshadow its ignorance and intolerance of peoples from other nations and cultural backgrounds.

Rose, a Nigerian immigrant in Northern Ireland tells her story:

I had a terrible, terrible time for about two years with immigration. I remember vividly an incident where I went to the immigration office with my husband and I was explaining to the man that I needed to extend my visa. The official said to me, 'It is the likes of you we want out of this country.' I said 'Why?' 'I have been here for nine years...and I have a house here and I have two children who were born here.' He said, 'You had no right buying a house in Northern Ireland, we want you out.' I have never been so humiliated, so degraded, in my life. It was painful. I said to the man, 'What do I do with my children?' he said, 'Just leave them and go, get out.' My husband said nothing so we got up and left, just left. I felt sorry for my husband. So we went out and had to get in touch with solicitors in London.²⁶

Today asylum seekers in Northern Ireland are held in prisons like common criminals. Chinese immigrants whose presence for decades seemed overshadowed by the sectarian troubles have now become the target of discrimination, abuse, and violence. Migrant workers, especially those who are easily identified by the colour of their skin and accent are special targets for attacks. Muslims who have been present in the Province for over a hundred years do not fair any better as recent experiences in Ballymena and Banbridge have clearly demonstrated.²⁷

²⁴ Note her policy to admit only 'Christian Jews' – or more precisely Jews who had converted to Catholicism – to Ireland after the holocaust in Bryan Fanning (2002: ch.4), *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Also note Southern Ireland's unwelcoming response to 500 asylum seekers from Hungary in as far back as 1956 and 27 asylum seekers from Kurdistan in 1992. These demonstrated her past resolve to keep Southern Ireland homogenous and Catholic.

²⁵ Allen, Kieran (2004: 22-24), *Citizenship and Racism: The Case Against McDowell's Referendum*. Dublin: Bookmarks Ireland

²⁶ Ozo, Rose (Autumn 2004:13), "Where the Heart is" in *Lion & Lamb: Racism and Religious Liberty*. Belfast: ECONI

²⁷ Skuce, Stephen (Autumn 2004:6-9), "Faith in Ulster: Facing Up to Diversity" in *Lion & Lamb: Racism and Religious Liberty*. Belfast: ECONI

There are literally hundreds of stories of challenge by difference these and many more happening up and down this island everyday - the difference of colour, nationality, and culture. They are stories that declare by word, action and attitude that: "I am different from you; therefore I am better than you"; stories of exclusion of the humanity of others as unimportant and unrelated to our own; stories of ignorance of the oneness and interdependence that is at the heart of the diversity of the human reality.

Contrary, for example, to our views that refugees and migrant workers are here to sponge us of our wealth and good livelihoods, there is overwhelming documented evidence that these peoples have come with skills, knowledge, experience and energy that could contribute to the development of our country. The contributions of foreigners to the development of the health, industrial, spiritual, and cultural sectors of our country are already very evident. It is in fact the case that our economies and other service sectors will collapse over night if all foreigners were got rid of immediately.

How have the Christian churches in Ireland fared with regard to their response to strangers?

IV. Challenged by Ignorance: the Church in Ireland

One could be forgiven for thinking that the Church in Ireland is free from racist attitudes and actions.

Don't get me wrong. It is probably the case that the vast majority of Irish people – North and South - abhor blatant racism. Despite sickening racist stories in the tabloid press, there are scores of refugee and immigrant support groups all around this island, a lot of them organised by local Irish churches, Christian organisations, and people, many of whom I reckon are here today.²⁸

I describe the people doing this as 'margin people'. Like windows and doors on a house that let in the light and fresh air – something new, refreshing and energising from the outside – they, as it were, stand on the margins/boundaries of Irish society and culture to enable new ideas and good values of other peoples and cultures enter Irish people, society, and culture to energise and enlarge Irish people's understanding and practice of being human.

Much of the racism here in Ireland, I would argue, is unintentional, silent, under the surface, and expressed in the form of uncritical assumption of colour and cultural superiority

The opening words introducing the findings of a study commissioned by the body that organised this conference states that, "Consultations with black and minority ethnic individuals and their support organisations in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland indicated that there was evidence of racism within the church and its structures." We all have the report and can refer to it.

I just want to particularly point out that 'ignorance' featured as the topmost issue in that report.

(1) While there are many examples in the report of efforts by different churches, Christian organisations, and individual Christians in Ireland to welcome and support non-Irish peoples in their midst, "aloof", "inward looking", "separate", "frightened of us", "condescending", "patronising", and "apologetic", are some of the words the latter used to describe the church in Ireland as they have generally experienced it. And they believed that these attitudes are informed by "ignorance and influenced by an acceptance of public prejudice and negative stereotyping of black and minority ethnic people." [p.8] Some "said they expected the Church to be 'welcoming'. Instead, they have found that churches do not generally know how to react to black and minority ethnic people. [p.9]

²⁸ Ibid, O'Mahony, p. 173ff

There are instances in the report that suggest that non-Christian and non-Irish people on this island have noticed at least hints of condescending attitudes of Irish churches and Christians towards them. They expressed this by reference to what they described as a “perception within the church that ‘only Christians are good.’” They substantiated this by reference to what they see as the church’s self-imposed need to ‘civilise heathens’ who are believed to be “beneath and below the church” [p.9]

Many did not believe that churches saw and knew “the bigger picture” of society because they believed the churches focused too much on people and issues directly related to the church and simply had too little contact and interaction with people outside of that circle to be aware of, highlight, and effectively tackle racism in the society at large. [p.12] They therefore concluded that “...the churches’ failure to provide a visible challenge could be the result of its [sic]own ignorance.” [p.11 first draft]

So, what should be the way forward for the churches?

V. Challenged by Ignorance: The Way Forward To Accepting the Humanity of Others as Equal to our Own.

The climax in the story of Ruth in the Bible comes when Ruth says to Boaz ‘her redeemer’, “Why have I found favour in your eyes such that you recognise me, though I am a stranger?” [Ruth 2:10] Had Boaz seen in the human other something of the image of God and of the reality of human struggle to live up to that image against all odds?

The Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”, but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger’. Time and again it returns to this theme.²⁹

When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The stranger who lives with you shall be treated like a native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. [Lev. 19:33-4]

Holding a view or taking an action that is intended to diminish or exclude persons because of their ethnicity, colour or place of origin is something abhorrently more evil than other forms of discrimination. It is the worst form of human rejection because it is connected innately to a person’s biological being. It, arguably, is the greatest ‘NO!’ that any person can say to God, the Creator of heaven and earth and human beings. In an institutional, cultural, or individual form - ‘symbolic’ or ‘old fashion’, ‘subtle’ or ‘naked’ - such discrimination is an expression of total rejection of what it means to be a person. From a moral perspective, such discrimination is a sin that cries out to heaven and is blasphemy to the Creator, and must rightly be a major concern for all the Churches.³⁰

So what is the way forward for the churches on this Ireland to accepting the humanity of others as equal to our own?

Obviously, it is not easy to undo 500 years of history, and we can never be perfect in our relationships with other people. But there are many things the churches can do. The AICCM report has many practical suggestions. [pp.7, 8, 10-11, & 14] I will briefly mention 5, some of which are also hinted at in the AICCM report.

(1) First, Christians in Ireland should acknowledge there is ‘racism’ in the churches and seek to repent of it.

Repentance features as the foremost call of Jesus to the sinner. He called to repentance those who falsely pronounced sinful what was innocent and sinned against their victims. But he also called to repentance the victims of oppression themselves.

²⁹ This point is made by Sacks, *ibid* 58f.

³⁰ These are largely words of O’Mahony, *ibid*, 166 says

Why? It is because they were not just simply sinned against, but they also had committed sins of their own. And, dare I say, some non-Irish people's behaviour in Ireland has not always been faultless! Many have defrauded the states, acted insensitively towards Irish people, and engaged in activities that have called their integrity and, indeed, the integrity of other non-Irish people, into question. They need to repent of that if the kind of Irish society and people they hope for should materialise.

That is not all. Jesus also called the victims of oppression to repentance because he wanted to prevent them from either mimicking or dehumanising the victimiser.

Anyone who has been a victim of abuse of any kind knows how easy it is to do exactly that. Marginalisation breeds resentment on the part of those who experience it. **The recent riots in France are a case in point.**

So Jesus also asked victims to repent, not because he believed all sins were equal, but because God's new world cannot take place without the undoing of the chains of exclusion, violence and power of oppressors and oppression by victims of other's sins.³¹ Strangers on this island who are being discriminated against, oppressed and exploited have a duty to forgive and love those who sin against them.

As sinners, and as those sinned against, the oppressed, too, have to heed the call of Jesus to repent.

This is to say that the true cure for the "I am better than you" disease is self-knowledge. Once we let the eyes of our understanding of ourselves open, we shall talk no more of just our goodness, but we will also talk about our failings. "Self-knowledge is the prerequisite of humanity."³²

This recognition will make us better able to nurture an attitude towards ourselves and others that will leave us more accepting and forgiving of other's faults. Another way of putting this is to say, believe in the God of Jesus who says He created all human beings in his own image, but also declared all of them fallen.

(2) The second way forward, and not unrelated to the previous ones, I suggest is this. Let the church bring to the centre of its thinking, teaching, and preaching, a theology that takes the connectedness, relatedness, and interdependency of creation and life more seriously than it does now. For too long, especially for those who belong to the evangelical tradition, we have focused almost exclusively on the salvation of the individual. Modern economic, cultural, and environmental realities suggest that if we do not take the reality of the connectedness of creation as a whole, we may not, after all, be able to save the individual.

"Genesis 1 portrays God's creative activity as a pattern of separating and binding together" in the process of getting rid of the formless void. "God separates light from darkness, day from night, water from land, and sea creatures from creatures of the land. But at the same time God binds things together – human beings to the rest of creation as stewards and caretakers of it; to himself as bearers of his image; and to each other as perfect complements."³³

This means that while borders that mark our identities are important and necessary in life, they also should be seen as bridges into each other's worlds of experience. As Sacks rightly argues, "Our particularity is our window on universality, just as our language is the only way we have of understanding the world we share with speakers of other languages."³⁴

³¹ Volf, *ibid* 114

³² Vaux, Tony (2001:72), *The Selfish Altruist: Dilemmas of Relief Work in Famine and War*

³³ Plantinga, Cornelius (1995:29), *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Quoted by Volf, *ibid* 65

³⁴ *Ibid* 56

Exclusion is the sin that pulls apart what God has joined together, or encourages the chaos that disconnects our connectedness and erases our differences as abnormalities.

We should reject exclusion because the prophets, evangelists and apostles tell us it is a wrong way to treat any human being, anywhere, and we are persuaded to have good reason to do so. The churches in Ireland need to think, talk, and act out the implications of being part of a ‘cosmic fraternity’.”³⁵

(3) The third way forward I suggest is that we should mind our words

Our words betray what we think of others and ultimately inform, even if unconsciously, how we relate and act towards them. The Pharisee in the parable we looked at is a case in point.

How we talk about and represent others is very important. Practices and judgements that exclude others, Volf says, “would either not work at all or would work much less” well “if it were not for the fact that they are supported by exclusionary language”.³⁶

Our conversations about other people can either acknowledge our oneness with fallen humanity struggling in different and sometimes opposing and/or admirable ways to be what we believe God has placed us in this world for, or we can represent ourselves as above that struggle. We can choose to see and talk about people as mere labels – asylum seekers, migrant workers, refugees, Muslims, Buddhists, lazy, dirty, parasites, black, brown, yellow people, and so on - or we can choose to see and talk about them as real human beings like ourselves. Labels hurt; but not only that, labels prevent us from seeing ourselves – our struggles, aspirations, weaknesses, fears, and pains - as struggles, aspirations, weaknesses, fears, and pains those we label also experience. By so doing, we deny, not only their humanity, but ours as well.

Our speaking about other people as though they are things and not human beings makes us practice inhumanity towards them.

(4) The fourth way forward, I suggest, is to try and be in as much contact as possible with strangers in our midst

Let us endeavour to have more contact with people and ways of doing things we see and perceive as different from us and ours.

It was Allport³⁷ who in 1954 first proposed a psychological theory in a classic treatment of prejudice in its traditional form. He called it ‘contact hypothesis’.

In his ‘contact hypothesis’, he proposed “the idea that at the core of much inter-group hostility is ignorance and that increased contact between groups should lead to an increase in knowledge about each other and therefore a reduction in hostile attitudes and behaviour”.³⁸

“We don’t like people making assumptions about us, feeling sorry for us”, said some of those interviewed for the AICCM report. “Just get to know us, understand our mannerisms and our cultures” [p.8), they requested.

In a way, this is a request that Irish people in general, and Irish Christians in particular, learn to respect and value - perhaps even embrace - the otherness of non-Irish people in its own right, so that others become transformed from strangers into friends and neighbours.

³⁵ O’Mahony, *ibid* 172

³⁶ *Ibid* 75

³⁷ Allport, G (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

³⁸ Quoted in MacLachlan, Malcolm & Michael O’Connell eds. (2000:6), *Cultivating Pluralism: Psychological, Social and Cultural Perspectives on a Changing Ireland*. Dublin: Oak Tree Press

This cannot happen without contact. Positive contact with strangers, as I have noted, is already happening in different places and ways on this island. We will, no doubt hear, in the workshops, about the work of some of the people and groups who are in contact with strangers. But much of that work is fragmented and left to local and individual initiatives. Not only that, it seems contact by these individuals and groups has not really impacted much on the island-wide psyche.

Is it, I wonder, because, as Allport also suggested, contact is only likely to be positive if (1) those in contact with each other consider themselves as of equal status, (2) pursue common goals, and (3) interactions between them are backed up by institutional support?

With regard to the first 2 conditions – being of equal status and pursuing of a common goal - the Christian faith professes that all human beings are of equal status before God and should pursue the common God-given goal of enabling all creation, in the way they relate to every sector of it, to reflect the glory of God in the fullest possible way. May be we need to look again about what we profess vis-à-vis what we actually do.

With regard to Allport's third condition – institutional support - I want to suggest that all churches could consider an equal rights and justice based approach to ministry and service. How would this be done?

(1) By every church denomination putting into place leadership training programmes for all sectors of ministry in the Church, which deal with equality and justice issues particularly, though not exclusively, relating to white and non-white relationships in the church.

(2) By local congregations and church denomination making sure that all stakeholders of any church-run organisation and/or service be proportionally represented at leadership, decision-making, and service provision levels of the organisation, including church councils.

(3) And, finally, by mission statements of local churches and denominations reflecting something of this equal rights and justice based approach to Christian mission and service, so that annual local church and church denominations self-appraisals would reflect the issues of equality and justice in the way the faith is expressed in practice in worship, mission and service.

These, I suggest, would serve to set the churches on a more integrated, co-ordinated, and systematic way of addressing the problem of racism and other forms of discrimination that exist in and outside the churches of Christ on this island.

(5) The fifth and final way forward, I suggest, is Dialogue

At this year's ecumenical conference in Glenstal Abbey in Co. Limerick, Dr. Ursula King of the University of Bristol in England reminded us that at "the present moment in human history and global politics when we are desperately in need of greater co-operation and mutual understanding, there is a special urgency to ask ourselves what we can learn *from each other*, how we can use our multiple resources", skills and experiences "for the good of the human community rather than for its violation and destruction."³⁹

Dialogue, trialogue, and/or multilogue are the ways she suggested we go about doing this. All of these require us to meet, talk, and listen to the different others in our societies. Such encounters in conversations must start with questions not answers, and with seeking not certainty. They would require openness and willingness to listen to each other and to learn from each other.

³⁹ Ibid 6

Let me keep it simple stupid.

One problem with the Pharisee was that he chose to be the authority on the life of the Tax Collector. Well, how wrong he was! For 500 years you have chosen to be authorities on the life of non-white peoples. And see how wrong you have often been, as I have tried to argue.

So, I plead to you Irish people to ask us strangers to tell you our own stories and share our experience – to tell you what we believe are our needs, strengths, weaknesses, poverties, riches, hopes, fears, struggles, and feelings; and allow us in turn to ask you about yours. Allow the strangers among you in Ireland to invite you in their worlds of experience with the world, and they, in turn, will allow you to invite them into yours.

Then it will be left to each group and/or person to choose which parts of the worlds they have been invited into they want to inhabit and make theirs, and which parts they want to reject and stay out of. And this process won't be simply about choosing or rejecting the other's worlds of experience, but of both and more in the way of further questioning, refining, and affirming of desired values, and so on.

In genuine dialogue with others, we will encounter "Otherness [that will] break the boundaries of our existence by disclosing new openings, leading to new questions, new horizons..."⁴⁰

Without losing our respective identities, the task of relating our respective values and visions to each other can enlarge and enrich us all together and give us access to a deeper understanding and sharing, so that we may become empowered to work together for a better world.⁴¹

So, do not assume you are authorities on us. If you do that, you will, like the Pharisee, only talk about us, and not for and with us. And ultimately, you will find out, to your and our detriments, you are terribly mistaken and wrong.

You see, as human beings, each person and people know themselves better than anybody else - expert or otherwise - will ever know them. So we have two choices: (1) we can choose to give others a voice to tell us how they, at least, perceive themselves; or (2) we can choose to silence others and become their mouthpiece. With the former, we will have a more authentic representation of what others, at least, perceive themselves to be; and with the latter, we will have to settle for caricatures of what we think and believe they are.

Genuine dialogue does not seek to erase the other's differences, but seeks to accept and understand them as and for what they are. For, as Wiesel⁴² rightly points out, the encounter with strangers can be creative only if you "know when to step back.... A stranger can be of help only as a stranger, unless you are ready to become his/her caricature. And your own."

This is not a plea for segregation, but one for true relationality that lets people just be, without us telling them by word, deed or attitude what they should be. Churches must endeavour to create spaces for such dialogue to take place. For there can be no encounter between cultures, peoples, and faiths that are closed to each other.

Conclusion

Like everything else about living the Christian life, we need divine guidance and help in embracing the stranger as one of us in God.

So let me conclude with a prayer. First, a prayer by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, followed by a prayer by Teilhard de Chardin.

⁴⁰ Ibid 5

⁴¹ Ibid 9

⁴² Wiesel, Elie (1990: 73), *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*. New York: Summit Books. Quoted in Volf, *ibid* 65

Let us pray.

“Let the rain come and wash away the ancient grudges, the bitter hatreds, held and nourished over generations.

Let the rain wash away the memory of the hurt, and the neglect

Then let the sun come and fill the sky with rainbows.

Let the warmth of the sun heal us wherever we are broken.

Let it burn away the fog, so that we can see each other clearly.

So that we can see beyond labels, beyond accents, gender or skin colour.

Let the warmth and the brightness of the sun melt our selfishness, so that we can share the joys and sorrows of our neighbours.

And let the light of the sun be so strong that we will see all people as neighbours.

Let the earth, nourished by rain, bring forth flowers to surround us with beauty.

And let the mountains teach our hearts to reach upward to heaven.” Amen.⁴³

And, finally, Teilhard de Chardin’s prayer:

“Grant, O God, that the light of Your countenance may shine for me in the life of the ‘other’. The irresistible light of Your eyes shining in the depth of things has already guided me towards all the work I must accomplish, and all the difficulties I must pass through. Grant that I may see You, even and above all, in the souls of my brothers [and sisters – my addition], at their personal, and most true, and most distant. Amen.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Received from Oak House Inter-Church Fellowship Newsletter, November & December 2005

⁴⁴ The Divine Milieu, p.138f, quoted by King, ibid

Affirming Identity to Create Community.

Rev Philip T, Sumner

These days, after her journey from the Guardian to the Daily Mail, one might expect Melanie Phillips to denounce multiculturalism as antithetical to the notion of society, but what of Trevor Phillips? It was a shock to many when, last year, the current chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality called for the abandonment of outdated policies on multiculturalism. When, nearly a year later, the same Trevor Phillips called for black boys to receive some lessons in classes separate from their white peers in order to address their particular needs, the shock, for some, turned to confusion. Surely, the thinking behind such an approach would be classed as “multiculturalism”? For Trevor Phillips, however, what makes a policy on multiculturalism outdated and unacceptable is clearly not that it addresses and affirms a particular cultural identity, but that it leads to segregation rather than integration. What I hope to show in this article is that affirming cultural identity, far from being antithetical to society, is the very glue that will hold society together when it has become diverse.

The Nobel prize-winning novelist, Toni Morrison, in her first novel, “The Bluest Eye” told the story of a young girl growing up, in 1930’s America, in a dysfunctional family. This girl, an African American, was subjected to physical and sexual abuse and her self-esteem was desperately low. The spoken and unspoken messages from the world around her were that people of her own cultural identity were not valued. On the contrary, it seemed to her, from the adulation given to film stars, that the person most valued in the America of her day had to have blue eyes and look like Shirley Temple. She thought that, if only she had blue eyes, her own parents would love her. Because the syndrome, spoken of here, significantly affects the self-esteem, it also affects motivation for learning and ability to form healthy relationships with others.

Chamoiseau, another prize-winning novelist (Prix Goncourt), explores, in his book “School Days”, the effect of this “Bluest Eye” syndrome (though he doesn’t call it that) on a child’s ability to learn. His story is of a young Creole speaking child, who goes to school in a French colonialist education system. He had been an enquiring child searching for knowledge. But, as he enters school, Creole is frowned upon and only Parisian French is accepted. In other aspects of what he is taught, he hears the message that not only is Creole frowned upon, but also that everything coming from France is superior to that which can be found in his own culture. Gradually his self-confidence takes a dive and his desire for education wanes.

The well-known clinical psychologist, Carl Rogers, wrote about the “self-concept” and of its importance for education. He spoke of how this “self-concept” is affected, both consciously and subconsciously, by the myriad of messages that spark off a process of self-comparison and self-evaluation, simply by living in a particular society. Imagine, for example, a black child in British society. That child, as he walks down the street, as he goes to school or watches the television, sees images of people of his cultural identity in situations that express a value judgement about those people, and consequently about himself. If it is clear from those images that people of his cultural identity are all too often in unskilled jobs (if they have jobs at all), or disproportionately represented among the prison population, or perceived as potential muggers, his self-esteem will be significantly affected. A black British clinical psychologist, Jocelyn Maxime, has often spoken about children of her ethnicity, who, when asked to draw self-portraits, draw themselves with European features. This is the “Bluest Eye” syndrome. Interestingly, the journalist Nasreen Suleaman, in a recent programme on the BBC, referred to the eldest of the July 7th bombers, M. Sidique Khan, as being integrated into British society, even to the point that he wanted to be an American! It would seem, therefore, that the messages coming from British society too suggest that white European culture is valued most. Melanie Phillips and Norman Tebbit would argue that there has to be a dominant culture or we risk creating an ethos of competing cultures that will destroy society. But a dominant culture suggests superiority. A young Muslim like M. Sidique Khan, who adopts British culture as if it was something superior, thereby risks

damaging his self-esteem and adversely affecting his ability to develop healthy relationships that create society. The results, as you can see, are potentially devastating.

For a person to enter into healthy relationships requires the ability to believe that he is loveable. If a person's self-esteem is significantly low then he either avoids entering into a relationship or he tries to control the relationship so that he believes he cannot be hurt. The same applies to cultural communities. For there to be good relations between communities, each community has to believe that it is highly estimable. Then, as bridges are built, there have to be good foundations on each side. People from both cultures need to know who they are and be proud of who they are. Sometimes, in multicultural settings, one community can become too fearful of expressing its own identity for fear of upsetting other communities. Again, people do not build good relationships by hiding their real personalities. The mixing of cultural communities is often complicated further in that it takes place in the domain of one of those communities. People refer to themselves, for example, as being British Bangladeshi or Black British. This does not mean that "British" is the superior, or even dominant, culture but that people can choose an over-arching culture that becomes a common factor for a group of cultures in a particular context. Then, for example, a common language and legal system between those cultures simply helps communication and integration. It is not that the common language or legal system is superior *per se*, but it is essential for good communication or order in that context.

Multiculturalism, as I understand it, however, does not require us to hold that every culture is of equal value. As a person's context changes a different lifestyle may become more appropriate. From a religious point of view also, a person may believe that his/her particular faith is the true one but may still have tremendous respect for other faiths and see them as *the* route to salvation for other people. The recent "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church" recognises this from the Roman Catholic standpoint: "...the inchoate (*sic*) reality of the Kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church, among people anywhere to the extent that they live 'Gospel values' and are open to the Spirit..." (*Op. cit.* par. 50). This is a similar position statement to one made in 1991: "It will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition...that members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ" (Dialogue and Proclamation, par. 29). It is, however, clear from these position statements that not all cultural groups would reflect those 'Gospel values' and, therefore, would not all be "highly esteemed".

So as to affirm individual identities in Church life we have to be aware of the dynamics that can either undermine or aid the process. The first of these dynamics, clearly an undermining one, is Institutional Racism. Both MacPherson and Scarman, in their now well-known reports that refer to this dynamic describe three common expressions of it: "colour blindness" (Scarman par. 4.97 & MacPherson par. 6.18), "stereotyping" (MacPherson 6.17) and "established groups in the exercise of power".

As a Parish Priest and a governor of several schools, I have, over the years, interviewed hundreds of teachers for their jobs. I have asked every teacher, whatever the position being applied for, "How will you use your role in this school to respond to the particular needs of the African descent or Asian descent child". I could count on one hand the number of good responses I have received to the question. Indeed, many will say, "I don't see colour; I treat everybody the same!" If you don't see colour then you would tend to treat everyone in the way that you would expect to be treated. This may respond to your needs but not necessarily to the needs of people of Asian or African descent.

Bishop Braxton, an African American Bishop, once wrote about visiting a church building with a group of young African American children. After a while, one of these children tugged on his coat and asked if there were no black people in heaven. When the Bishop asked, "why?" he was told that all the saints portrayed in the church and all the angels were white! In one of the parishes in which I was involved, we commissioned some local black secondary school children and a black artist to produce a large mural. This was then displayed in a prominent position in the church and was specifically intended to proclaim and celebrate black presence. Because I was also the chaplain to the Chinese community, I asked if that community wanted to do something similar. They produced a triptych of the three prayers,

“Our Father”, “Hail Mary” and “Glory be” written in Chinese. This too was displayed in a prominent position.

Liturgical expression can also be very mono-cultural with music and movement (or lack of it) from one tradition. In the parish where I now serve as Parish Priest, we have three choirs, a “folk” choir, an African choir and a Filipino choir. The Filipino choir sings at the main Sunday service on the second Sunday of the month and the African choir on the last Sunday of the month. There would always, however, be at least three hymns in English on those days.

This aspect of affirming identity needs to be mainstreamed so that it pervades all that we do. For example, during a recent “Teacher day” in Oldham, all the secondary school teachers in the authority went to a local school that was focussing on their curriculum area. During the day, they were given specific examples of lesson plans, using the national curriculum, to demonstrate how they could affirm individual identities through the delivery of their curriculum area. This was not to be something just for Religion and PSHE but for every subject.

Stereotyping takes place when someone thinks he knows the particular needs of a community but has failed to check his ideas in this regard with the community itself. We all have a responsibility to engage, as soon as possible, with people of other cultural identities entering into our localities. Real engagement helps to dispel any myths and to discover the particular needs of those communities. This takes time and there are no short cuts! We have to learn how to communicate in a way that demonstrates our esteem for those with whom we engage. In this process, we may discover that some of our language with regard to other communities may be inappropriate. We may make mistakes and have to seek forgiveness. But fear of using language that might be deemed inappropriate, fear of entering into someone else’s culture and being thought foolish, should not be dressed up as justifiable disdain for “Political correctness”.

In the same way that many people would criticise “political correctness” others would show disdain for multiculturalism as if it was all part of a liberal experiment that went wrong. Some, who think in this way, would, however, mistakenly understand multiculturalism as what is often termed “the Saris and Samosas approach”. This approach treats other cultural communities in an overly simplistic, superficial and, therefore, “stereotypical” way. It treats them as if they are exotic but does not suggest that they “belong” or are understood. A Caribbean “theme” evening once a year, for example, hardly addresses the particular needs of the African descent members of a community. Each cultural grouping has to feel that it is somehow part of the very fabric of the wider community and not an exotic decoration that can easily be discarded at whim.

In a similar way, making references to, or displaying images of, Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King does not necessarily demonstrate respect for people of African descent. If they are the only people of African descent that are referred to with respect, then it is clear that they are seen to be exceptional, and, therefore, not typical.

With regard to “established groups in the exercise of power”, how many times have the words, “We have always done it this way!” been spoken in Church communities? Immediately any change that might accommodate new communities becomes almost impossible. If people from different cultural communities have recently arrived to join a worshipping community and everything remains the same, one can almost guarantee that institutional racism is at play. There is the suggestion made that for a black person to join a so-called “mainline” Christian denomination in Europe or in the USA, he is in danger of losing his black soul. Lawrence Lucas, an African American Catholic priest, in his book, “Black priest/White Church” (Africa World Press 1989), spoke of meeting Malcolm X when he (Lucas) was on his way to seminary. Malcolm X asked him what he was doing. When Lucas told him, with some pride, that he was on his way to study to be a Catholic priest, Malcolm X said, “Are you out of your God damned mind?” Later, when he had become a priest, Lucas said that he realised the full horrible truth of what Malcolm X was suggesting. He claimed then that the most devastating effect of Catholicism on Black people has been the loss of their “black” minds.

It is the dynamic of Institutional Racism that provides the horns of the dilemma facing many Christians of African descent. On the one hand, they are ideologically opposed to the very idea of segregation. On the other hand, pastoral neglect and a failure to enable religious expression with which they can identify leave them to seek out other sites for the development of their own spiritual life. Some would join the so-called “Black led” Christian churches, others would follow the likes of Malcolm X, who, in the early days of his conversion, saw Islam as the faith for Black people. Unfortunately, it is often a criminal, radicalised and extremist version of Islam that they then espouse because of their perceived rejection by the white Christian communities in particular and white society in general. Notably 70% of African Americans who go to jail come out having embraced Islam, or what they perceive to be Islam (Cf. Paul Valleley, in *The Tablet*, 12th Nov. 2005).

Thankfully, from my standpoint, a new ecclesiology has been developing in the Roman Catholic community over the last forty years. This is an ecclesiology of communion and it is here that we find a dynamic to support the affirming of individual cultural identities. This ecclesiology is based on the belief that each person is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19). With this ecclesiology there is much talk of “the inculturation of the Christian message”(cf. par. 532 of Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church), which is described as “the productive encounter between the Gospel and the various branches of knowledge”. From the same source, it is suggested that: “...every person, family and intermediate group has something original to offer to the community”(C. of S.D.C.). In this ecclesiology, people from every cultural identity are able to find something of themselves in the telling of the Christian story and they are able to participate in the retelling of that story from their own experience. For people of non-European ethnic groupings, however, brought up in a European expression of Christianity, it might take some considerable deconstruction and excavation before being able to reconstruct a theology that truly honours who they are.

With a communion ecclesiology, unity is found through respecting diversity and not through expecting uniformity. The model of the Trinity is the model *par excellence* for the Church and for any grouping that seeks real unity. Our involvement in the Trinity, however, calls us to hear and respond to that eternal prayer that proceeds from the Son to the Father. It is a prayer of absolute dependence. It is that same prayer that we are told, in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, issues from everyone that is moved by the Spirit and it makes us cry out “Abba”, “Father”. The place that we hear that prayer most clearly is among those who are in desperate need. A communion ecclesiology, therefore, also requires those involved to hear and respond to this prayer. There are often so many issues of inequality affecting incoming cultural communities. People from Church communities should be seen to be aware of those inequalities and to be addressing them with some success. Perhaps, for example, churches could make themselves even more aware of the situation affecting our asylum seekers. Destitution caused by the removal of support, affecting subsistence as well accommodation, even when cases are not fully determined, is causing a massive problem for Church and society alike. Immigration and asylum is a controversial area but church communities can all too easily follow the populist line and appear unwelcoming to people in desperate need. There are often concerns about worshipping communities becoming too political but if those communities are not seen to be involved in the struggle to create something of the Kingdom here and now, they will fail in their mission.

Conclusion.

The peace process in Northern Ireland and the significant economic growth in the Republic of Ireland have resulted in the arrival of many new immigrant communities into both places. Diversity is now a growing reality here for Church and society alike. A secularist or “colour blind” response that denies the relevance of religion or culture will undermine community cohesion. But some policies of multiculturalism are outdated in that they are stereotypical or bereft of judgement and, therefore, become destructive of society. It is only by affirming different identities that are indeed highly estimable that we create community.