‘All Because of Religion!’ Religion, Violence and the Imperative of Transfiguration

I am grateful to Ludo for the invitation to speak at this evening’s On the Way meeting. After discussion we agreed that I should speak about the topic of religion and violence, a topic that I have been challenged by and wrestled with over many years. A couple of years ago the national ecumenical body Churches Together in Britain and Ireland invited me to speak on this theme for their annual David Goodbourn lecture. They also invited me to choose my own title for the talk. Such freedom however has its drawbacks. Although both the words, ‘religion’, and ‘violence’ presumably needed to be in the title – and, for reasons you will see later on, I also wanted the word ‘transfiguration’ to be present – I found myself hesitating for several weeks over how exactly to put them together, in a way that would both challenge and intrigue potential listeners. The day of necessary decision was drawing very close.

And then one evening a few weeks before the lecture I was browsing on the local social media forum, linked to our village in rural Dorset. A contributor, not known to me personally, had posted a note that read, ‘All because of religion. So sad’, and had then given a long list of the names of children who were victims of the ongoing violence in Israel and Gaza. I doubt if the person was religious herself. But it was telling how for her the association between religion and violence had become so gut-level instinctive. She was of course at least partially correct: there is a clear association between what is currently happening in several parts of the Middle East and ‘religion’ as a phenomenon – so clear that it is apparent even in peaceable Dorset. And I had found the first half of my title for my CTBI talk, ‘All because of religion’. The only question that remained for me was to decide whether to punctuate it with an exclamation mark or a question mark. I opted for the former.

This is a theme that is only too topical in our world at the moment. It would be a mistake to suggest that the current war between Russia and Ukraine, or in Israel and Gaza, or more recently the United States and Iran was only due to religion, but it would equally be a mistake to suggest religion is not a factor in these conflicts. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine includes an element of religiously motivated violence; Hamas’ attack on Israel on October 7 2023 includes an element of religiously motivated violence; some aspects of Israel’s response in Gaza could be linked to religiously motivated violence; there have been some strange and worrying comments of a religious nature among the

American leadership, political and military, in relation to Iran. Conversely the veneration of martyrdom in Shia Islam has been a factor that has strengthened the Iranian response.

Given my own life-story the relationship between religion and violence is not simply an academic topic for me. It relates both to my own personal life experience, which includes a decade as a young adult spent living in the Middle East, in Jerusalem and in Lebanon, as well as my professional and academic work, initially in the area of biblical studies and more recently in interreligious dialogue, a field in which I have worked both for the Anglican Communion and the World Council of Churches.

My work during these years required me to participate in a considerable number of high level conferences or meetings. I have listened to a lot of words and contributed quite a few of my own. But occasionally I hear something which imprints itself into my mind and heart in such a way that I have found myself keeping coming back to it. This was so when I participated in a conference held to mark the opening of the St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in 2002.

St Ethelburga's was a small church in the heart of the City of London. In 1993 a bomb planted by the IRA just outside the building, primarily aimed at the nearby banks, exploded and badly damaged the church (ONE). Subsequently there was considerable discussion as to what should be done with the ruin: some suggested that it should be completely pulled down and the site disposed of. It was the vision of Richard Chartres, then Bishop of London, to rebuild the church, but dedicate it particularly to the role of being a Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. By 2002 Bishop Chartres' vision had come to fruition. The Centre was opened by the then Prince of Wales, and on the following day a conference was held. Not surprisingly the keynote speaker came from Northern Ireland. He had links with the Corrymeela community based there. And it was his comment for which I was so grateful then, and have been over the years since. (TWO) Reflecting on the theme of violence he said, "Unless a religion is willing to acknowledge that it is part of the problem [when it comes to violence] it cannot also become part of the solution." It was said starkly and simply. And ever since, that sentence has been for me a touchstone for my own work in interreligious and indeed interchurch relations. "Unless a religion is willing to acknowledge that it is part of the problem [when it comes to violence] it cannot also become part of the solution."

The speaker on that day was not necessarily thinking only of intra-Christian religious violence, but in the context of his remarks in the destroyed but restored St Ethelburga's it was good to be reminded that people who identify themselves as Christian have in the very recent past justified violence to further a cause which they see, at least in part, in religious terms. Religiously based violence is not just something that is out there in distant parts of the world; it is a phenomenon that can occur in Britain and Ireland not only when we import quarrels which began far away onto the shores of these islands; it has been, certainly until very recently, a feature of homegrown tensions in which religion played a part, however intertwined with nationalism or other factors it might have been.

What I take the sentence, 'Unless a religion is willing to acknowledge that it is part of the problem…' to be saying is that if a religious tradition is going to play a constructive part in peace-building it is essential for it to be willing to be self-critical, certainly of its history and practice, but perhaps even of its theology. And if I am brutally honest, during my years of participating in so-called high level ecumenical and interreligious dialogues I have not heard that many religious leaders willing to be so. Generally the picture that is painted by each participant is to extol the peace-building virtues of their own religion or religious tradition.

A predecessor of mine in the World Council of Churches interreligious office, Hans Ucko, during a conference held a year or so after the shocking events of 11th September 2001 put it graphically: (THREE)

> We should address the question of religion and violence, but from a particular angle. We should not do so from a defensive perspective and above all not lift our banners or slogans with the ideals of our religions. It is true that Islam is literally the religion of peace. It is true that *Om Shanti, shantihi* is the emphatic Vedic blessing. It is true that Jesus greeted people with the gift of peace, 'Peace be upon you'. It is true that there is an absolute emphasis on compassion and *ahimsa* in Buddhism. It is true that Judaism has given the world the word and concept *shalom*. It is true that in many cases, based on their ideals, religions seek to contribute to building peace. However, we know that they are also involved in situations of violent confrontation. There is, in the religious field, a surprising coexistence of love and violence, of affirmation of inclusiveness and practices of regrettable exclusion. Religions are more than often related to the powers that be, which seem to provide the legitimisation

> for violence. There are groups within our religious families who seem to need violence to affirm their own beliefs. We cannot run away from the effect of religious language such as 'Onward Christian soldiers', and acts such as the Crusades, the Holocaust or apartheid. We cannot run away from the role of religion in the caste system. We cannot run away from the blasphemy law in Pakistan or Baruch Goldstein in Israel. We have to ask the penetrating question about the role of religion in violence. Religions are no innocent bystanders between Scylla and Charybdis."[1]

Ucko goes on to comment (FOUR) how, "We need to reflect on the ambivalent function of religions in our world, to make an effort to clarify the different roles of religions in relation to violence." He suggests that this must be done before we can affirm that peace is the common goal of religions, and before religious communities can work together for the construction of peace. I would agree with Ucko.

I have already mentioned that the topic has deep personal resonances for me. During the 1970s and early 1980s my husband Alan and I lived in Lebanon during the first 8 years of its civil war. There were efforts in some circles, perhaps particularly among liberal Christians, to claim that the Lebanese civil war was not a 'religious' war. And those who propagated that view were partially right. The outbreak of the war in 1975 and then its continuance for 15 long years were due to a mixture of factors: the economic and social inequalities in the nation; the confessional structure of Lebanese politics; the ambiguities relating to the Palestinian presence in the country, represented both by the large number of Palestinian refugees with few rights and, after 1971, the presence of the Palestinian military and political leadership; the determination of the other countries of the Middle East to use the soil of vulnerable little Lebanon to play out their proxy conflicts with each other. All these played a role. But also, on the part of at least some Christians and some Muslims, a religious element was part of the mix. There was a real fear of the 'other'; a resolve on the part of some Christians not be to swallowed up in what they viewed as the vast Middle Eastern Muslim sea, and for some Muslims a determination that the mores of the 'Christian west' should not be allowed to taint Arab culture, which was for many, seen as interchangeable with Islam. Every Lebanese citizen carried an identity card which stated their religious affiliation: there were many instances of people who were unfortunate enough to find themselves at a militia check point with the

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[1] Current Dialogue 39, 2002. (Also published in 2003 in *The Ecumenical Review*)

‘wrong’ religion on their card and were ‘disappeared’, never to be seen again. We knew instinctively that there was a religious current to what was happening around us. Sometimes it was simply an undercurrent – at other times it was painfully obvious. Perhaps because we were Christian ourselves we were more conscious of the apparent religious motivation of the ‘Christian militia’ who then controlled East Beirut. (FIVE) Many of them wore large crosses, super-large, around their necks to proclaim their motivation for the armed struggle. It was seen as the appropriate accessory for the rifles and Kalashnikovs which they also carried. Shortly after we returned from Lebanon to the United Kingdom in late 1982 around the time of the Phalangist massacre of the Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila, my husband was asked by an ecumenical group of Christian organisations to write a booklet, ‘Who are these Lebanese Christians?’ (SIX) to explain to bemused members of the British churches how groups who so overtly described themselves as Christian could perpetrate such an atrocity.

I have deliberately begun by sharing an example of religiously motivated violence for which adherents of my own religious tradition, Christianity, were responsible. I believe that in interreligious engagement we have the right and duty to challenge followers of other religions to acknowledge possible violent propensities in their faiths, but that we can only do so with integrity if we are also willing to confess the fallibility and failings of our own. And that needs to be our starting point. But there are also two other responsibilities that we then have. One is not to collude with adherents of other faiths who are unwilling to recognize that their religion too may be guilty of such failings even if it may sometimes be politically easier to stay silent. The other is to make the effort to dig deep to find fresh resources that our religion can offer for overcoming violence and building peace in our world. I will be seeking to address that particular issue from a Christian standpoint in the final part of my talk this evening.

Before I do that however I want to share some other illustrations of what I think of as religiously motivated violence which is a bit like a many-headed Hydra, taking on different shapes and forms – not always following quite an expected ‘profile’. Deliberately, several of the illustrations draw on personal experiences of my own, which may mean that the Middle East is over-represented.

Before my marriage and move to Lebanon I worked in Jerusalem. It was in the courtyard of St George's Cathedral there one day in 1977 that one day I met a friend of mine, Najwa, (SEVEN) a Palestinian Anglican Christian, a distinguished poet and the wife of the then Anglican priest in Ramallah. She was almost hyperventilating with shock. She had apparently been having lunch at the guest house attached to the "other" Anglican church in Jerusalem, which although it was located in East Jerusalem, indeed the Old City, saw its ministry as largely related to Jewish people. A western Christian tourist from the United States, also at lunch, had asked Najwa about herself. When my friend had responded, "I am a Palestinian Christian living in Ramallah," the woman had retorted, "You can't be a real Christian because if you were a real Christian you would have known that God had given this land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and you would have got up and left the country."

It was my privilege to meet on several occasions Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, elected in 1976 as the first Bishop President of the Anglican Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East. (EIGHT) Bishop Hassan was an Iranian, and the bishop of the Anglican Church in Iran. He loved the beauty of words and was a poet. He was also a convert, having, as a young man, originally from a Muslim background, become a Christian, although he remained deeply respectful of his Muslim roots and was known for his commitment to interreligious dialogue. As soon as the Iranian Revolution began in 1979, because of his convert status he, his family and the Anglican church as a whole became a key target for government and revolutionaries. A gunman broke into their apartment and attempted to kill Bishop Hassan. Though they only succeeded in wounding his wife it was a clear signal that the bishop needed to leave the country at least for a while. He was never able to return. A few months after his departure his only son Bahram was murdered in Tehran. The prayer that Bishop Hassan wrote on hearing of his son's death became a spiritual classic of the 20th century. It speaks of the *'love* that makes us free from all hatred towards our persecutors' and ends with the word 'forgive'. Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani of Chelmsford is the daughter of Bishop Hassan and the sister of Bahram.

I was part of the small international team drawn together to write the Bible Studies for the 2008 Lambeth Conference for the bishops of the Anglican Communion. We had been asked us to focus on the Gospel of John and were exploring the 'I Am' sayings which are such a characteristic feature of this Gospel. (NINE) One particularly striking 'I Am' saying comes at the climax of John 8; after a discussion which has become an argument between Jesus and

some Jewish leaders. The challenge of the passage though is made even more acute by what shortly precedes it. In John's account Jesus, in response to some sharp criticism by his interlocutors states baldly, 'You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.' (John 8.44) It is crystal clear that this verse within Christian scripture has been used, or mis-used, throughout much of Christian history to justify hostility towards the Jews, including for example by figures such as Martin Luther. This trajectory of hate culminated in the Nazi era, which saw a children's book published in the 1930s with the title, 'The father of the Jews is the devil', clearly deriving its title from this Gospel passage. Those of us working on the Lambeth Conference Bible Studies we could not ignore this passage, even though it was very painful to have to deal with it. The long story of antisemitism, which is sadly part of Christian history, is something that the Christian churches need to acknowledge. Antisemitism has been described both as the 'oldest hatred' and 'a light sleeper'. The requirement for Christians to engage with antisemitism challenges us to reflect on key tenets of our faith – and certainly questions of biblical exegesis, interpretation and authority. How we use the Bible as Christians is not a 'neutral' question, and it is rarely 'innocent'. Sadly sacred texts are sometimes a weapon in the alliance of religion and violence, but perhaps they can be also a tool for combating that unholy pairing.

Violence that is apparently religiously motivated can be targeted against members of one's own community. Often women will be particular victims of this. I still remember a train journey Alan and I made in North Syria over 40 years ago when we met an Assyrian Christian from the Hassake region who, on discovering that Alan was a Christian priest was keen to share his family story with us, on the basis that we would naturally sympathise with his perspective. We had asked him how he perceived the situation at that time for Christians in Syria. 'Difficult', he said, and expressed his desire to emigrate. He then went on to explain the problems as he saw them. 'I had a sister', he said, 'but she married a Muslim. So I got out my gun and I shot them both. The government put me in prison. But my church community, they paid money and got me out of gaol. However now, the community is poor, so that if another of my sisters decides to marry a Muslim, and I kill her, they would not be able to afford to pay a fine on my behalf.' That was 40 years ago: attitudes towards women

have perhaps shifted in some religious communities since then. I hope so. I was however deeply saddened to read only a few weeks before I gave my 2024 lecture that the leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada had stated: “You may call it a violation of women’s rights when we publicly stone or flog them for committing adultery because they conflict with your democratic principles,” he said, adding: “[But] I represent Allah, and you represent Satan.”

The Middle East tends to be newsworthy but regularly there are stories which come out of Pakistan which remind us of the vulnerability of religious minorities in that country : the long saga over more than 9 years of Asia Bibi, a rural Christian woman who initially offended her Muslim fellow workers by drinking from the same cup as them and then was accused of profaning the name of the Prophet Muhammad, became both a saga of religiously inspired violence, with Bibi languishing in jail under threat of a death sentence for (TEN) breaking Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, and an illustration of the powerlessness of the government of Pakistan when confronted by religious extremism. And what is important not to forget is the linked murders of two politicians, one Muslim and one Christian, Saleem Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti, specifically as a result of their opposition to the blasphemy laws and support for Asia Bibi. A visit I made to Peshawar in Pakistan in 2009 also remains in my mind for two reasons. First worshipping on the Sunday at the beautiful church of All Saints in Peshawar Old City. (ELEVEN) Three years later the church and congregation were attacked by Muslim extremists during Sunday worship and 128 people killed. Second, I was taken by my host, the then Church of Pakistan bishop of Peshawar to visit the family of his friend the leading Shia Imam of the region. Life is certainly difficult for Christians in Pakistan: yet in some ways the Shia community is the target of even greater hostility from Sunni extremists. The previous month the Shia mosque in the centre of the city had been attacked by Sunni militants, as it was also in 2022, while the wife of the Imam had recently been shot in the legs while walking in the street. They were grateful for our concern.

I am not an expert in the so-called Dharmic faiths, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, but during my years at the World Council of Churches I worked with several Indian Dalit Christians, who challenge the caste structure of Hinduism, and the rise of the Hindutva movement in Modi’s contemporary India, in which hostility to Christians and Christianity has grown exponentially. It is very easy to

see in this situation how the violence against the Christian minority is intertwined both with nationalism and with economic and social concerns, due not least to the way that those privileged by the caste system are determined to hold on to the power that it gives them. Violence against religious minorities, linked in some way to nationalism has also become a reality of life in some majority Buddhist countries.

One very different example. I live these days in Dorset close to the place where over a several decades in the 20th century what were called the Iwerne Camps used to take place each summer. The camps offered a mixture of summer physical activities, group bonding and fundamentalist Christianity. The camps have become notorious due to the involvement of an Anglican layman, John Smyth, who was chair between 1970-1980 of the Iwerne Trust which organised the camps. (TWELVE) Smyth has been accused of savagely beating a number of the young men who attended the camps (not perhaps at the camps themselves but at his home in Winchester) and of behaving similarly abusively to young African men after he was 'exiled' from Britain in the early 1980s. In one particularly horrific case it resulted in the death of a young man in Zimbabwe. There was a Church of England report published on the activities of John Smyth in autumn 2024. It led to the resignation of the then Archbishop of Canterbury. But what, if anything, is the connection between the theology 'taught' at the camps, which emphasised the penal substitutionary view of the atonement of Christ, and the 'penal' beatings that John Smyth administered to his victims?

We now share on the screen (THIRTEEN) some key points that I have tried to illustrate through my stories:

- The role that scriptural texts and their interpretation can play in such violence.
- The fact that religiously motivated violence can be intra-religious, for example between Sunni and Shia Muslims, or Protestants and Roman Catholics, as well as interreligious, for example between Muslims and Christians
- The way that verbal violence, as well as physical, can be dangerous, indeed one can easily lead to the other.
- The way that the targets of religiously motivated violence can include the members of one's own religious community, or even family.
- The reality that Christians have been guilty of religiously motivated violence, indeed still are in some parts of the world, as well as being victims of it.

- The way that our theology can be a factor in justifying the use of violence. I am thinking particularly of the Christian history of antisemitism, or the story of John Smyth and his victims.
- The fact that religiously motivated violence can be entwined with nationalism or economic concerns.

I return to that sentence I heard that day at St Ethelburga's. (FOURTEEN) Unless religion is willing to acknowledge that it is part of the problem it cannot also be part of the solution.

What is it about religion that makes it so possible for it to be co-opted as a bed fellow of violence? To answer that question I need to define what I understand by the word 'religion'. It is not precisely the same as 'faith' or 'spirituality'. It is both more – and less – than these. There are varied definitions of 'religion' but what they seem to have in common brings out the way that religion emphasizes the importance of loyalty to a human community that intersects with and somehow reflects an absolute supranatural and cosmic order. It is, I believe, this combination of human desire to honour the transcendent and the "binding" (the word *religion* is etymologically derived from a Latin verb meaning "to bind") of human beings to a communal group that gives religion both its power and its potential danger. For it means that our natural — and often constructive — desire to express our contribution to the human community of which we are a part is somehow reinforced and then "absolutized" by this intersection with the unarguable transcendent. Our loyalty to the divine and our loyalty to other human beings who believe as we do (or at least we think they should) mutually reinforce each other. And thus we begin to think that only we, and those who think like us, are full and proper members of the religious community with which we identify, whether we think of it in terms of the Muslim *umma*, the Christian "Body of Christ," or the equivalent in other religions.

This intersection between the community and the divine can become more problematic for a variety of reasons. One is the often overlapping nature of a person's religious identity with national identity or other aspects of identity. Although there has been a long-standing tradition in Christian theology, going back to the New Testament, that our "citizenship is in heaven" and thus our religious identity supersedes national or ethnic identity, in reality we have to acknowledge that for Christians, no less than for people of other religions, the issue is not so simple. That has become clear not least in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where Patriarch Kirill (FIFTEEN) has regularly

reiterated his support for the war, naming it as ‘holy’. Often there is the expectation, whether verbalized or implicit, that all people of a particular nation or ethnicity will be practitioners of a specific religion or, conversely, that if people are followers of a minority religion, they cannot be fully trusted as loyal citizens of that particular nation. Such views, quite apart from militating against a real understanding of the importance of freedom of religion, facilitates the link between religion and aggression.

Another intensifying factor comes when people feel that their community identity, whether religious, ethnic, national, or a combination of various of these, is unfairly disadvantaged in wider economic and political realities. There is a connection between the imbalance in the ownership and control of our world’s material resources and the willingness to justify violence on religious grounds. Perhaps it has become even more problematic because of the development of globalization. Somehow this modern reality, which feels especially disempowering to those who see much less of its apparent benefits, has helped to reinforce the sense that only a cosmic and transcendent religious reality is powerful enough to stand up to the impact of such an overwhelming force as globalization and rectify the injustices that may well be real and certainly are so perceived by many. Indeed, the imbalance in our world is all too often made clear by the different levels of media coverage given to acts of religiously inspired violence. Even one death resulting from such actions is too many, but it is notable how just a few Western deaths garner more publicity than the hundreds killed fairly regularly in Nigeria.

It is interesting—and significant— that we quite often use the term *fundamentalist* as a label to describe those who are responsible for acts of religiously inspired violence. Some of the illustrations I offered employed the word ‘fundamentalism’. The media frequently speak about “Islamic fundamentalism”. In some ways this is a misnomer. The term *fundamentalism* was originally developed in the nineteenth century within Christendom to describe a particular attitude to scripture, and in particular Christian scripture, that treated it as infallible and inerrant. In one sense, from this perspective the great majority of Muslims could legitimately be described as fundamentalist because the normative mainstream Muslim attitude toward the Qur’an would be to treat it as inerrant and infallible. Critical hermeneutical methodologies for scripture are not unknown among Muslim scholars, but they have not taken centre ground as they have done in much of Christianity,

in which many people like myself, who cherish the Bible, are willing to address to the text challenging questions about authorship, interpretation and authority.

Indeed one of my joys as a Christian biblical scholar has been learning from the methodologies of Jewish rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. Traditionally there has been a willingness in such exegesis to allow for the biblical text to have multiple meanings offered by a variety of rabbinic voices. These interpretations are often set out alongside each other not to choose one over the other, but to allow each to implicitly comment on or modify the other. Christians have not on the whole not been so willing to allow for such diversity in interpretation. That has been true not only within the fundamentalist strand of Christianity, but is also reflected in scholarly Christian exegesis, which until recently worked on the quasi-scientific and post-enlightenment principle that texts have essentially one primary meaning. I am grateful for learning more about the richness of meaning in scriptural texts from Jewish colleagues.

Such a breadth of possible interpretive meaning is particularly important when it comes to reflecting on difficult scriptural texts that appear to promote violence. This point has been well made by former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book on religious violence, 'Not in God's Name': (SIXTEEN)

Never say, I hate, I kill, because my religion says so. Every text needs interpretation… Religions, especially religions of the Book, have hard texts: verses, commands, episodes, narratives, that if understood literally and applied directly would not merely offend our moral sense. They would also go against our best understanding of the religion. There are many examples in the Hebrew Bible. *(Jonathan Sacks).*

Given this honest assessment of his scripture and how it should be interpreted by a leading Jewish scholar I have to say that I find deeply problematic the recent development of hard line Jewish religious Zionism which does not treat scriptural texts with the degree of sophistication that Rabbi Sacks asks for. It seems to be a fairly recent development, certainly since 1967, and my considered opinion is that this way of thinking been heavily influenced by very conservative Christian Zionist use of the Bible – such use being reflected in those comments such as were made to my friend Najwa which offered a simplistic take on the story of Abraham. I also grieve deeply that Prime

Minister Netanyahu should draw on biblical texts about the apparently mandated destruction of the Amalekites to justify Israeli treatment of the people of Gaza: however many Jewish colleagues or friends were even more

One of the features of Christian fundamentalism has often been the weight it has given to what are called the 'apocalyptic' texts in the Bible. I think particularly of the book of Revelation in the New Testament and in the Old Testament texts such as the book of Daniel and parts of Ezekiel and Zechariah. Apocalyptic is an important theological genre; it has been described as 'the mother of Christian theology'. It can offer deep hope to individuals and communities living through persecution and times of evil. But it is also very dangerous when such apocalyptic biblical passages get used as historical text books as happens in some forms of fundamentalism, including Christian Zionism. It is particularly dangerous when the apocalyptic vision gets coopted by those in power in order to reinforce their control. An example of this was the way that, at the early stage of the US – Iran war, some American political and religious leaders, described the military campaign using references to apocalyptic events such as Armageddon.

But although it is very tempting to stick with the Bible, and we will return to it shortly, I need to acknowledge that when it is used in common parlance today, the term *fundamentalism* has taken on a broader connotation than just referring to how we understand scripture.

In plain language fundamentalism is often seen as a fear of what modernity brings, and the modern world offers us. The connection between fear and violence runs very deep. Such a fear can be expressed in one of two ways: either by isolating oneself in a small sectarian group that seeks to detach itself as much as possible from wider society or by an attempt to take over society and organize it on the basis of idealized "fundamental" principles.

There is, however, a real link between this definition of *fundamentalism* and what I would call the earlier "scriptural" one. What connects the two is a sense of absolute fixity—an unwillingness to change, to adapt, to interpret something in the light of something different or new. Rather than adaptation, fundamentalism seeks, or at least is willing to accept, confrontation. Hence a readiness to turn to violence. Hence, too, perhaps we can understand that there is a particular tendency toward fundamentalism in this wider sense in religious traditions that are uneasy about modern critical interpretation of scripture. Perhaps there is also a particular challenge for Islam to face in

relation to these questions, precisely because the traditional ideal relationship between religion and state does differ from that of Christianity or some other religions. My mentor and friend Bishop Kenneth Cragg used to comment 'Islam is a religion continually in the process of becoming a state'. It is an oversimplification, but there is some truth in it.

Given the definition I have offered I do not consider what I call 'spirituality' the same as religion. It is, however, related to it, and one of the tasks of spirituality may be to help to redeem religion from its tendencies toward violence and exclusivism. A key characteristic of spirituality, indeed one of its vital challenges to religion, is its elusiveness. In spirituality a religious tradition often finds itself moving beyond dogmatic certainty to allow itself to become more vulnerable. One of the simplest—yet also profound— definitions of spirituality, is offered by John O'Donohue in his book Anam Cara. He called spirituality "the art of transfiguration." (SEVENTEEN)

Spirituality—linked as it is to the word *spirit*—speaks to us instinctively of what is flexible, impossible to pin down, capture, or control. 'The wind blows where it wills'. Defining spirituality as "the art of transfiguration" writes into our understanding a positive and open appreciation of change and transformation, as well as a willingness to be rooted in our own religious tradition.

I think of fundamentalism and transfiguration as offering us two opposing poles: on the one side 'fundamentalism' speaks to me of a harsh rigidity which finds the notion of change threatening, external, problematic and seeks to oppose it, and is at home in a world of binary polarities; on the other hand 'transfiguration', which for me is a motif that deeply true to my understanding of Christianity, is flexible enough to allow change to appear from within itself and takes a proactive role in enabling it. Hence the final phrase of my title, 'the imperative of transfiguration'.

For Christians there is a scriptural warrant for this flexibility, in the great pledge of John 16:13 that the task of the Holy Spirit is to lead the followers of Jesus into new truths that they were not able to receive in Jesus's own lifetime.

It is possible that one of these new truths is a call—which would have been alien to many of our ancestors in the faith—to engage in serious and constructive dialogue with people of other faiths and religions.

The very act of dialogue is an act of vulnerability, for it is an act that presupposes willingness to be changed by the encounter with another.

It is important that part of our response to dreadful acts of religious extremism is a willingness to take interreligious dialogue and engagement more seriously. It is certainly not what the extremists want—and it is therefore a gesture of defiance of their violence and their hatred.

When I speak of 'transfiguration' I am alluding to both a theological concept, which is related to, but not precisely the same as 'transformation', and I am also alluding to the biblical story of the transfiguration of Christ which appears in all three synoptic Gospels. There is a relationship between the two senses, my understanding of 'transfiguration' as a theological concept is informed by my reading and interpretation of the biblical narrative. (EIGHTEEN) Its place at the very centre of the earliest Gospel, that of Mark, suggests that may be intended to offer a vital lens through which to explore the Christian theological vision. That is hinted at in the well known remark by Michael Ramsey that, 'The transfiguration 'stands as a gateway to the saving events of the gospel, and is a mirror in which the Christian mystery is seen in its unity. Here we perceive that the living and the dead are one in Christ, that the old covenant and the new are inseparable, that the Cross and the glory are of one, that the age to come is already here, that our human nature has a destiny of glory, that in Christ the final word is uttered and in him alone the Father is well pleased. Here the diverse elements in the theology of the New Testament meet.' Given this comment made by one of the most influential British theologians of the 20th century it is strange how little attention is currently paid to the motif of transfiguration in British and Irish theological reflection: though there is more consideration of 'transfiguration' in other parts of the anglophone theological world, as well of course in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of Christianity.

I do not consider 'transfiguration' to be precisely the same as 'transformation'. Years ago I came across a remark by the Methodist minister Martin Eggleton who pointed out that transfiguration may be about a process of change, but it is change that starts from the basis that tradition is also important. (NINETEEN) As Eggleton put it, 'Transfiguration into the future surely must have some semblance of having had a tradition. Transfiguration does not do away with what is, it changes one's perception of it, heightens it, enables it to be something revered, not in a magical sense, but with true awe.' I believe that

the motif of transfiguration allows us to grasp ways in which religion can honour the past without being trapped by it, and also suggests that change should not merely be tolerated but required for the Christian religion to be true to itself. Transfiguration is also a process that requires we ourselves, whether individuals or a religious community, to be transfigured, to be changed internally, if we are to become true participants in such a movement.

Several of these features are reflected in the New Testament account of Jesus' transfiguration. Links are clearly made to the tradition and past of the Old Testament, and especially the royal ideology. Yet there is also something new happening here signalled by the change in the appearance of Jesus. In turn the change in him both provokes and encourages response and change in the disciples, who now find themselves caught up in a process that centres on Jesus, has indeed begun with him but will not in fact be complete until all the world is transfigured. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3 act as a commentary on this: 'We all with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transfigured into the same image from one degree of glory to another' with his final words making it clear that he sees this as a work of the Holy Spirit. Although I am reflecting from a primarily Christian viewpoint, I consider that a trinitarian Christian understanding of the nature of the Holy Spirit requires us to see the possibility of this elusive Spirit also being at work in other faiths.

The comment by the Australian theologian Dorothy Lee sums up the essence of transfiguration: The transfiguration 'is the meeting-place between human beings and God, between the temporal and the eternal, between past, present and future, between everyday human life – with all its hopes and fears – and the mystery of God.'[2] Concepts such as holistic, developmental, growth are closely linked in my mind with the mode of transfiguration.

As 'meeting place' transfiguration offers us an alternative model to the binary polarities which are so much a part of the mode of fundamentalism. I see this as being hinted at within the Book of Genesis itself, in which a recurrent theme is the binary hostility between brothers. It is a theme that begins near the very beginning of the story: Cain's murder of Abel, which was provoked by a quarrel over sacrifice. The first murder coincides with the first act of religiously motivated violence. From Cain and Abel, the theme of that binary pairing, but also hostility, between brothers runs through the rest of the book. Until at last,

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[2] Dorothy A Lee, *Transfiguration*, Continuum, 2004, p.2

even if for only a brief moment, (TWENTY) it is finally overcome when Jacob and Esau greet each other after 20 long years of alienation, and we encounter the essence of transfiguration as Jacob says to Esau, 'Your face is like the face of God to me, with such graciousness you have received me'. If people can really see the face of God in each other then religiously motivated violence becomes, in my view, virtually impossible.

There is however a further learning that can come by drawing together the story of Genesis and the importance of transfiguration. In the New Testament story Peter comments, 'It is good to be here'. That word 'good' is, I am sure, a deliberate echo of the repeated 'good' that is spoken during the story of creation. Transfiguration both affirms yet challenges physical and concrete realities. It is the antithesis of the Gnostic dualism which stemmed from strands of Graeco-Roman philosophy and has influenced both Christianity – and other religious traditions – to this day. (TWENTY-ONE) As the Orthodox icons suggest, surrounding the figure of the transfigured Christ with a globe of light, this process of transfiguration needs to continue until eventually the whole world is caught up in it and the goodness of creation can be cherished by all. Such a world-affirming vision is in itself a bulwark against religiously motivated violence.

This picture of the transfiguration (TWENTY-TWO), which is a 6th century mosaic in the apse of the church of St Apollinaire in Classe in Ravenna, conveys well the glory and beauty of creation, as the goal of transfiguration. It is also a unique depiction in art of Christ's transfiguration – there is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. At first glance one would not necessarily realise that is what it is seeking to show. There is no obvious representation of the transfigured Christ. That it refers to the story of the transfiguration is however suggested by the named figures of Moses and Elijah in the uppermost part of the scene. And if you look carefully you can see the face of Christ – just the face – at the centre of the picture in the middle of the cross. I have described the scene as the transfiguration of the transfiguration.

To explore the heart of the Christian mystery to ask how cross and transfiguration belong together. It is the literal crux of our faith, and it can and should offer us a vision in which our religion may become an instrument of reconciliation rather than violence. There are many strands to the Christian interpretation of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, several so-called theories of the atonement, some of which I am more comfortable with than others. But I think that placing the cross at the centre of our faith, as is of

course done visually in most of our churches, is, or ought to be, a statement that it is part of our human condition that we fail, both as individuals and as religious communities, and that the experience of being broken and remade is intrinsic to Christian faith. Indeed any religion which prides itself on perfectionism can be very dangerous indeed, especially if it is intermingled with or colludes with the toxic brew of nationalism or politics.

Yet of course the cross itself can be so misused. I return to those large crosses worn by the Christian militias of Lebanon, which seemed to be as much a weapon as the guns they bore. They considered themselves the descendants and heirs of the Crusaders – a word which itself incorporates crux, the Latin for 'cross'. We have to acknowledge that the Crusades played a deeply problematic role whose impact still reverberates today in the Middle East.

The great Protestant theologians of the mid-century century such as Barth and Bonhoeffer returned on many occasions to the theme of the cross as needing to stand in judgement not only on humanity as a whole, but on religion and religious systems.

And it is salutary to remember that this talk is being offered shortly after Easter. It is tragic but true that in previous centuries Holy Week was a period deeply feared by many Jewish communities in Europe. Many attacks on them took place at this time, prompted by the liturgies of Holy Week and especially Good Friday, and by the desire of some Christians to use the story of Jesus' death to be critical of others – rather than of themselves. Indeed I think that a large part of the reason for the conflicted historical relationship that has existed, certainly in the past, between Judaism and Christianity is that in light of our common shared scriptural inheritance our relationship with Judaism requires Christians to exhibit a greater degree of self-questioning and self-criticism than does any other religion.

So at the same time as treasuring the cross as a resource for peace-building, I think we also need to interrogate some of the ways it has been interpreted. It is indeed possible to see how the battle language of the Christus Victor understanding of the cross, or the judgement motifs of some penal substitutionary language can encourage forms of violence, whether physical or spiritual. I rejoice in the fact that though our Christian creeds clearly refer to the fact of Jesus' crucifixion, they nowhere clearly set out exactly how the cross works in the economy of God. I suspect that many of us view the cross through the spectacles offered by a particular vision, which can then draw

other elements into itself. My own gaze at the cross takes place in the light of the spectacles provided by the great statement of Paul in 2 Corinthians, 'God was **in** Christ reconciling the world to himself, and has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation.' The ministry of reconciliation then surely offers a key entry point, which requires us to be changed, transfigured, as well as seeking to effect change in others. Historically speaking in the early church I think reflection on the meaning of Christ's cross did come before a worked out theology of the incarnation was elucidated. But I think the one prompted the other: that it was quickly realised that proclaiming reconciliation linked to the death of Christ could ultimately only be meaningful if one could also speak of God's intimate involvement in the life of Jesus Christ and thus eventually say 'the Word became flesh and dwelt with us.'

I believe that Christian exploration of the incarnation for me must include an affirmation of God valuing weakness, vulnerability and failure, precisely because that is part of the human condition. Indeed for Christians our understanding of the incarnation is ultimately rooted in and underpinned by Genesis' concept of human beings as being created in the image of God, and this in turn will inform our commitment to human rights.

But there is something else about the incarnation that I want to tease out. All religions I believe have to live with an element of paradox. But I want to suggest that paradox is an absolutely essential element of the Christian theological tradition. Paradox I understand as the collision of two opposites which gives birth to new understanding. The Scottish theologian Donald Baillie reflected that the incarnation is 'the supreme paradox'. He also suggested that for a religious tradition not to allow for paradox is problematic and 'that most of the great [Christian]heresies arose from an undue desire for simplification, an undue impatience with mystery and paradox, and an endeavour after a common-sense theology.' 9 TWENTY-THREE0And it is surely when religions are impatient with mystery and paradox, when they seek to promulgate established certainties, and when they no longer struggle to hold in tension diversity in unity, that they risk losing the capacity to be self-critical and become potentially dangerous. I would want to say that 'transfiguration' is the visible expression, indeed the word sacrament could even be used, of the paradox of the incarnation.

It is I think not accidental that it is strands of Christianity in which the 'incarnation' does not play a significant theological role which are particularly susceptible to fundamentalist forms of religiously motivated violence.

I conclude however by returning to our Christian symbol of the cross. A few years ago I came across a photo of the wonderful window in Hereford Cathedral in honour of the 17th century Anglican mystic Thomas Traherne (TWENTY_FOUR) created by a Dorset stained glass artist Thomas . The window is designed to illustrate the line from Traherne, ''The Cross is a tree set on fire with invisible flame which illumineth all the world. The flame is love.'.

Looking at Denny's window the way that the figure on the tree which represents the cross almost disappears into the background, gives us a sense of the Crucifixion almost as the 'dissolution of God'. It is as though the concept of God is dissolved and remade, as if the Cross itself – and its occupant – are being transfigured for the sake of the beauty of the whole of creation, for its radiant life. In order to give radiance to the creation the creator accepts being at this 'crux' as vulnerable yet life-giving victim. Surely it is in growing such a tree of the cross we are giving our answer to the horror of religiously inspired violence?

Come, holy fire of love
find in us your dwelling;
purge, refine
and then combine
all that is good to share
in loving care
for one another;
And may the fruit
of this holy tree
abide in us, for all eternity.