

Encountering other faiths

Edward Williams has been deeply involved in interfaith issues for many years. He reflects on what he's learned, and on the Joppa Group, the Baptist interfaith network

MY WIFE Rosemary and I went to India in 1959 with the BMS. As an eager-beaver young missionary my theme text was from Acts 26 - 'To open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.'

I taught at Serampore College in the physics department, whose head was a wonderful Bengali gentleman. In his Calcutta MSc he had come second to a future Nobel prizewinner (plus taking first place in MA History in his spare time). Not only his scholarship, but this Hindu's humanity and spirituality put mine into the shade, and eager-beaver missionary had to do some very rapid thinking.

One conviction, which has remained ever since is that you do not magnify Christ by belittling others.

I was drawn to reflect on Jesus' words to his disciples, 'Many prophets and kings longed to see what you see, but did not see it' (Matt 13:17). That did not make Jesus' disciples greater than godly men before them, any more than I set myself above Isaac Newton although I have had the privilege of seeing through telescope and microscope wonders that he never saw, and would have given anything to see.

In the same way, we can still have the highest respect for others even while we seek to share Christ with them.

As well as Hindus, we also counted Parsees and Sikhs among our good friends. Then, after our 10 years with BMS, I was for 16 years minister of a Baptist church in inner-city Birmingham. Here we encountered mainly Muslims and came to respect some of them deeply. Also, again, we formed some lasting friendships.

One was with the imam of the nearby mosque. There were cultural differences we learned to recognise. He could meet my wife, but I never set eyes on his wife until after his funeral. We could eat, and enjoy, whatever food they set before us; they could eat only halal food. (We learned that the best dish to serve when he and his family visited was fish fingers.)

His teenage sons gave only one-word responses when I attempted to talk with them - unless their father was not present, when they would converse freely.

Quite early on we came to the point when I said to him, 'I know that you would love it if I became

a Muslim, and I would be deeply glad if you became a Christian believer - we both know this, though we do not expect either to happen. With that understanding let us enjoy our friendship.' And we did.

The redevelopment of Birmingham's city centre provided another parable for me. When old buildings were cleared along Broad Street, I found that I had for years been crossing a bridge over a canal without ever realising that I was doing so. This illustrated another growing conviction: that Christ's redeeming work can be effective even for those who do not know him. Jesus said, 'No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6) - he did not say, '... except through knowing me'.

A Muslim-Christian summer school at Selly Oak provided some striking object lessons in interfaith attitudes. One speaker was a leading Christian scholar and writer on Islam at the time. As he spoke, one could sense growing unease among the Muslims who were present. 'This man does not really understand us.' Another speaker was Kenneth Cragg, whose Christian commitment no one could doubt - but the atmosphere was totally different.

On the other side, at this same summer school, a leading Muslim scholar and protagonist spoke. What he said in nearly an hour, with copious citations from the Bible and Christian literature, could be summarised thus: 'Whatever you say, what you Christians really believe

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in is three gods.' No doubt his talk would have been hugely acceptable in many Muslim circles - talks by Christians in similar vein about Islam are also highly prevalent and acceptable.

But that Muslim did not understand us, and would never



Living side by side - 'We can still have the highest respect for others even while we seek to share Christ with them'

have converted us. When he had finished, a number of us Christians were eager to answer back, but a Muslim lady was on her feet before us. 'Would all the Christians in this room who believe in three gods please stand up? Now, would all the Christians in this room who believe in one God please stand up...?'

If anyone were to convert us, it would have been that woman and not the speaker.

Not long after this Graham Routley, then a minister in Rochdale, invited me to join the process from which in 1985 came The Joppa Group. The choice of name was strategic. In interfaith, as in most other matters, there is a huge variety of approach among Baptists, from 'only convert' to 'only dialogue'. If we had chosen a descriptive name it would inevitably have labelled us at some point on the spectrum, whereas we wanted to try and bring together as wide a range as possible.

One of our declared aims was 'to hold together our Baptist traditions of respect for religious freedom and conviction, and our obligation to proclaim the Gospel'. So we took our name from the location in Acts 10 of an encounter with Christ in which both preacher and convert were transformed.

In the same year I moved to a church 16 miles outside Birmingham, and soon afterwards offered to become secretary of Joppa so as to make up for moving away from the front line of interfaith encounter. In 1991 we held a weekend



The Joppa executive - Back row (left to right) Rosemary Williams, Edward Williams, Janet Ruddick, Sue Sheppy. Front row (left to right): Mark Burleigh, Julie Aylward, Nick Wood

conference in Manchester out of which emerged the Joppa publication, *A Baptist Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue*.

It was at this conference that Joppa's present chairman, Nick Wood, and treasurer/membership secretary, Sue Sheppy, became involved. Also among the participants were Brian Haymes and Tom Bowman, Baptist Union president and BMS chairman in the same year.

Ten years ago, soon after retirement from pastorate and living in Malvern, I moved

sideways from secretary to become editor of Joppa Journal, working with cut-and-paste from a typewriter until I acquired a computer.

My wife and I became involved with Muslims again by teaching English to Bangladeshis in Worcester. And in our small village on the outskirts of Malvern we find ourselves with a delightful Muslim neighbour and friend who, if she were a Christian, would be described as a wonderful advertisement for the faith.

I am still on a learning curve.

I still wrestle to hold together the task of making Christ known, as the Light of the world and the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, alongside acknowledging the goodness and godliness of many who follow other ways. But I refuse to solve the dilemma by denying one side or other of the equation.

The Revd Edward Williams is a Baptist minister. He was until recently editor of the Joppa Journal, in whose last issue this article first appeared