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Challenged by Ignorance: Responding to the Strangers in our Midst

By Revd Dr Sahr Yambasu

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.¹

¹ HSC bank advert on ITV

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.

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.”²

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.

² The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, (1978:677)

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.

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 Volf³ 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.

³ Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996: 63-4

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 us⁴, if we cared to look for it. This parable of Jesus clearly demonstrates this.

⁴ Kristeva, Julia (1990), *Strangers to Ourselves* [translated by Leon S. Roudiez]. New York: Columbia University Press

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 human beings as different: the 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."⁵ 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 use of their conversational, material, and military power to discriminate against, exclude, and exploit non-white people is arguably unsurpassed in modern history.⁶

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:

⁵ (1907:109), Works IV. London: World's Classic Edition

⁶ Mazrui, Ali. A (1986: 301ff), The Africans: A Triple Heritage. London: BBC Publicatins

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.⁷

Immanuel Kant⁸, 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 Hegel⁹ 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.

⁷ "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

⁸ see his essay, "On the Varieties of Different Races of Men" quoted in Ibid 7

⁹ In his "Lectures on Philosophy" and "Lectures on the Philosophy of Right" quoted in Ibid 8

Yet, credible authorities¹⁰, 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.¹¹ 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.

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

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ Fr. O'Mahony, Donal, "The Role of the Churches" in Farrell, Fintan & Philip Watt eds., (2001:170) *Responding to Racism in Ireland*. Dublin: Veritas

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].¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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."¹⁶

¹² Volf, *ibid* 78

¹³ *Ibid* 75

¹⁴ Sack, Jonathan (2002: 49), *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations*. London: Continuum Books

¹⁵ Volf, *ibid* 74

¹⁶ *Ibid* 75

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, 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 lie 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 word-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.¹⁷

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.”¹⁸ 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.

¹⁷ “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

¹⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1979:100), *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One is.* ? Translated by R. H. Hollingdale. London: Penguin. Quoted by Volf, *ibid* 61

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,¹⁹ 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.

Not only that. The Irish State's historical record of welcoming non-white and non-Catholic peoples in Ireland is not encouraging.²⁰

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

¹⁹ 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

²⁰ 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.

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.²¹ 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.²²

Today asylum seekers in Northern Ireland are held in prisons like common criminals. Chinese immigrants whose presence for decades seemed overshadowed by the

²¹ Allen, Kieran (2004: 22-24), *Citizenship and Racism: The Case Against McDowell's Referendum*. Dublin: Bookmarks Ireland

²² Ozo, Rose (Autumn 2004:13), "Where the Heart is" in *Lion & Lamb: Racism and Religious Liberty*. Belfast: ECONI

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 Bambridge have clearly demonstrated.²³

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,

²³ Skuce, Stephen (Autumn 2004:6-9), “Faith in Ulster: Facing Up to Diversity” in Lion & Lamb: Racism and Religious Liberty. Belfast: ECONI

a lot of them organised by local Irish churches, Christian organisations, and people, many of whom I reckon are here today.²⁴

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]

²⁴ 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:²⁵

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]

²⁵ This point is made by Sacks, *ibid* 58f.

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.²⁶

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.

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.

²⁶ These are largely words of O'Mahony, *ibid*, 166 says

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.²⁷ 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."²⁸

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.

²⁷ Volf, *ibid* 114

²⁸ Vaux, Tony (2001:72), *The Selfish Altruist: Dilemmas of Relief Work in Famine and War*

“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.”²⁹

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.”³⁰

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’.³¹

(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”.³²

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

³⁰ *Ibid* 56

³¹ O’Mahony, *ibid* 172

³² *Ibid* 75

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 Allport³³ 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”.³⁴

“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.

³³ Allport, G (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

³⁴ 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

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.

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."³⁵

Dialogue, triologue, 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.

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.

³⁵ Ibid 6

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...”³⁶

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.³⁷

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.

³⁶ Ibid 5
³⁷ Ibid 9

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 Wiesel³⁸ 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.

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.

³⁸ Wiesel, Elie (1990: 73), *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*. New York: Summit Books. Quoted in Volf, *ibid* 65

*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.*³⁹

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.”*⁴⁰

³⁹ Received from Oak House Inter-Church Fellowship Newsletter, November & December 2005

⁴⁰ The Divine Milieu, p.138f, quoted by King, ibid

