

Canon Andrew White Interview

by
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Reverend Canon Andrew White is the Director of the International Centre for Reconciliation, Residentiary Canon of Coventry Cathedral and the Eric Lane Fellow at Clare College, Cambridge. He also served as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Special Representative to the Middle East and continues to be the Director of the Alexandria Track of the Middle East Peace Process.

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Career Calling

Kenneth Chase:

Let's begin with a brief review of your career. You began your professional life in medicine at St. Thomas' Hospital in London. You then moved into theological studies. Why? What motivated your change from a medical profession to full time theological work?

Canon White:

Well, my training as a surgical practitioner in one of London's best university teaching hospitals was something I had always wanted to do, and something I enjoyed immensely. Probably there is a point in almost every day when I wish I were back in the operating theatre. So, my departure from the life of the operating room was not something I had planned or something that happened because I was dissatisfied with my work. I greatly, greatly enjoyed it, and had, for someone who was a junior in that career, very considerable responsibilities, particularly working and helping to run the cardiac arrest team. Yet, there was an acute sense that God was calling me to something else. So, I moved into the field of theology and went off to study my theology at Cambridge after a rather prolonged intensive selection process. Initially, I found theology extremely difficult. People often say to me, "Well, after medical studies, you must find theology easy." Well, I didn't at all. I found theology an extremely difficult discipline and so much more complex, in many ways, than medical studies. Even now, I would say I find medical studies easier than theology studies. So, it was a move which happened very much, I feel, at the direction of the Almighty, and something that I had to do.

Chase:

You moved then from your position in church ministry as a vicar in Clapham, London, into social and political action as Councilor in the Borough of Wandsworth and deputy chairman of Social Service. Say a little bit about how that happened. What motivated you? What desires did you have that enabled you to move into politics and social service.

White:

Well, I have always had intense interest in politics. The three passions of my life were politics, religion, and medicine. I'd always had a real interest [in politics], and I am not very good at being a lobbyist or being involved from the outside, so I was community pastor, or parish priest, in London, and I was acutely aware of needs of the community, particularly the under-privileged members of the community. And either you spend hours and hours lobbying your

counselors and members of parliament, or you become one yourself and try to deal with it from within. I became part of the local government myself, and therefore, the buck stopped with me. It is a lot easier when you are actually the person responsible for making things happen than having to try and persuade the people who are responsible. So that has always been my methodology. And don't complain about those who are doing a job: if you are not happy with them, why don't you actually go out and do the job yourself?

Chase:

Then you moved from local politics and social service into more of an international ministry, and I assume that happened when you moved to Coventry Cathedral.

White:

Yes, it did.

Chase:

Again, describe the factors that influenced your decision to make that move-from local to international.

White:

All the time that I was involved in local government and in parish ministry, I also had a very considerable international focus to my work, and there were even staff on my team in the parish in London who particularly concentrated on working on international issues. So, when this particular position as the director of the International Center for Reconciliation came up and it was the first time in thirteen years that it had come up, the previous incumbent held the position for thirteen or fourteen years-it was suggested to me by my bishop that my name should be put forward. I was told quite clearly that in reality I was too young for such a job. I would be taking over from somebody who had retired, somebody who had founded Amnesty International, somebody who had been a very high profile figure, and therefore I was slightly surprised when I got the job.

Chase:

Do you see, in the future, where you will go next? What are some of your dreams and desires at this point in your career?

White:

I think the most important thing is to be where God wants one to be, and at the moment, I am only aware that God wants me to have this particular focus. But there are major downsides to this kind of life, particularly as regards one's family, and the fact that I am away from my family most of time, which is very, very hard. And so, I am not beyond the realm of looking at the possibility of keeping international involvement but not traveling quite as much as I do now. I really don't know. I've never sat down and planned myself how my life or work would develop. In fact, whenever I have done that, I have always ended up doing something very different from what I had actually thought or planned myself. So, it is in the hands of the Almighty, and we wait to see what opportunities come up.

Reconciliation and Christianity

Chase:

Let me now ask about some of the theological or scriptural guidelines that you use in shaping your work now. Are there some key theological principles or scriptural truths that support your work in reconciliation? What are those touchstone concepts or scriptures that shape your motivations, your passions, and your practice today?

White:

I think that the absolutely key point is the Cross, and I would say that our work was not only

Christo-centric, but cross-centered. And even if I am working within an Islamic context, or a Jewish context, or a context of another faith tradition, my driving force and inspiration is always the Cross, the Atonement, that greatest act of reconciliation in history when humanity is reconciled with God through the cross, and the words from the cross-particularly the words of forgiveness.

Chase:

Some Christians emphasize not simply the cross but the resurrection. Without the resurrection, the cross remains perhaps a great moral event-even a significant historical event-but we miss something extraordinary about the power of God, the ultimate redemption of people.

White:

I don't think you can see the cross without the resurrection. I really see the Easter story as one event. You people often talk about what is more important, Good Friday or Easter, and in our own cathedral, which is half destroyed and then rebuilt, people often talk about walking in the narrative of moving from Good Friday to Easter. As far as salvation history is concerned, they are one event. It's the triumph of God over death, evil, the devil, the bondage of sin, of hell, and therefore, the cross without the resurrection doesn't actually achieve anything. If you look, for instance, into 19th century liberal protestant theology and the quest for the historical Jesus, one of the things that you do in when de-mythologizing Jesus is that you actually end up with somebody who was ultimately unsuccessful. If we are talking purely about some charismatic Jewish leader who is eventually killed by the Romans and his own people, and if that is it, well, it was a failure, but it is the resurrection that explains to us what actually happened on the cross.

Chase:

When Paul talks about being a minister of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, he speaks very clearly about humans being reconciled to God, and that seems to be his calling.

White:

Yes.

Chase:

You speak of reconciliation, though, not just of humans to God, but also of humans to humans. How does this practice-the practice of reconciliation among estranged humans or warring cultures or nations-contribute to the practice of reconciliation that Paul urges?

White:

The passage in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, is really the key reconciliation passage; I think you are absolutely right. This is first and foremost about reconciliation between humanity and God and the calling of every Christian to actually be a minister and ambassador of reconciliation between humanity and God, sharing the gospel. In that respect, I would say that evangelism is a core part of the ministry of reconciliation. As regarding the inspiration to my own life and ministry, I would say that we look far more at the life and work of Jesus than at some of the teachings of the epistles. (Though I think Paul himself, by his mere discussion points of being a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks, certainly knew what it meant to try and identify with each community that he was working with.) We look at the life of Jesus and the forgiveness amplified in the life of our Lord to actually see the model for the kind of reconciliation ministry with which we are involved. And, I think, the passage which I am inspired by almost more than any other is Luke, chapters 9-11, where we see Jesus going on a journey to Jerusalem and encountering the other along the way and always responding in a radically different way from how the disciples responded. And so, I think, as we look at the life of Jesus, we see a radical ministry of reconciliation, a ministry of servanthood, a ministry of acceptance, and, at times, a very frustrated Jesus because those around Him didn't understand the nature of this calling to be a reconciling individual.

Chase:

When you are working with interfaith reconciliation, as well as inter-ethnic, or international reconciliation, you are working with people who do not name the name of Jesus, who do not know that they are speaking to a-well, I guess, they would know that they are speaking to an ambassador of Jesus-but they don't see themselves participating in the distinctively Christian understanding of reconciliation. How do you personally interact in ways that preserve your integrity as an ambassador of Jesus yet also preserve their distinctive interests in the reconciliation process, which may differ fundamentally from yours? They have no interest in reconciling with your God. So how do you deal with that kind of tension, maintaining your integrity and yet maintaining the integrity of the process?

White:

I must say that in our work-which is extremely political-I never feel that I have to compromise on my belief or understanding in the nature and the person of Christ. Neither do I think that I have to compromise my own theological beliefs. The very nature of our work is totally reliant on Christ and the leading of His Holy Spirit, and so I would say that whatever I am doing, whatever I am discussing, whatever political peace process I am involved with, I am trying to actually work within the mind of Christ and trying to insure that my wisdom is not just my wisdom, but it is the Word of God speaking through me. Now that is a very high thing to say, but we are promised that the Holy Spirit will show us what to say in difficult circumstances. And I must confess that in certain circumstances, I haven't a clue what to say, and I am having to be totally reliant on the direction of the Holy Spirit, because I just don't know how to respond. So I don't feel I have to compromise. I do feel that God inspires us in our work, and at the same time, whilst I don't compromise, I don't ask the others to compromise on their faith either.

Chase:

You mentioned in your lecture here on campus Tuesday night ["The Place of Reconciliation in the Mideast Peace Process" 10/14/03] that within interfaith dialogue-and perhaps specifically within the reconciliation process marked out by the "Alexandria Declaration"-you believe Christianity has a unique or distinctive understanding of forgiveness. And that may be one of the unique contributions of Christianity to the process itself. Would you elaborate on what you see as a distinctive contribution of the Christian understanding of forgiveness?

White:

I think once again we return to the Cross, where the Cross is an extremely radical and difficult form of forgiveness. And I think those who portray forgiveness as something that is easy or something that is for the soft or the weak have totally misunderstood the very nature of what it means to be involved in radical forgiveness. Forgiveness is a theological concept, but we are trying to enable others to realize that forgiveness has profound political implications. This is the heart of what we are doing. One of the things I said last night was that forgiveness is the only thing that prevents the pain of the past from determining what the future is going to be. So, I think it is absolutely essential that we look at the issue of how forgiveness can be an instrument of political healing.

Chase:

And do you see that emphasis coming from other faiths, or other traditions, or do you see that as being uniquely brought to the table by you and others representing the Christian tradition?

White:

Sadly, Christian traditions aren't always seen as bringing forgiveness and mercy and peace to the negotiating table. In reality, I do not think that Christianity-historically-is any better than any of the other religions as regards to violence. I would hope that the other people of faith that I am often working with would be able to bring their own distinctive understandings of mercy, and often there is the language of mercy rather than forgiveness. And though our concept of forgiveness may be unique, that has to come from within them. I cannot impose; I cannot make anybody forgive someone else. It has to come from within. It has to come from

within one's own spiritual tradition, and one has to look for the motivation within each of the faith traditions to actually stop violence. The Alexandrian Declaration talks about the killing of innocents and about violence as being a desecration of the Holy Name, and that is using very strong language. That language is not coming so much from the Christian tradition as the Islamic and Jewish traditions. God's name, which is holy, which is hallowed, is desecrated by violence being committed in the name of its followers.

Chase:

So you will find resources in Judaism and Islam to support principles of mercy, of peace, even forgiveness, and one of your tasks, then, is to actively cultivate that point of view with others in the dialogue, is that right?

White:

And I think it very important that it is not me who is finding or pointing these people to these traditions; that they find it themselves. It is absolutely essential that what they bring to the negotiating table is from their tradition.

Mideast Peace Process

Chase:

You currently direct the Alexandria Track of the Mideast peace process. What is your roll as director? What specifically do you do to facilitate those kinds of productive interactions where leaders from different faith traditions bring forth insights and truths that will shape the process itself?

White:

I think one of the most important things that I do is to spend a huge amount of time with the people corporately and individually and amongst them within their faith tradition group. I enable their story to be heard and then enable them to hear the other person's story. So, much of my work is actually enabling one group to understand what the other group is doing. But at the same time, I am the one who is left with the responsibility of keeping the process moving forward in the right direction and engaging with the diplomats and the politicians and trying to ensure that we deal with the particular crises as they come up. So, in the vast majority of the work done within the name of the process, my team and I actually facilitate—whether that be negotiating with terrorists, trying to get religiously sanctioned cease fires, or whether that be trying to get the European Union and the American government to take seriously the role of religious leaders within a political peace process.

Chase:

There were American casualties in the Gaza strip yesterday (October 15) and President Bush once again is calling on President Arafat to reign in the fringe terrorist groups that are operating in the occupied territories. He is once again calling for a strengthened Palestinian Authority. What kind of role does the Alexandria Process play in working among President Arafat, the Palestinian Authority, and the U.S. interests in trying to curtail terrorists' attacks?

White:

Well, on Tuesday (October 14) when I was speaking here, I made it very clear that I thought very soon there would be attacks from Palestinian terrorist groups, not just on Israelis but also on Americans. It is not always nice to be proved right. But the reason I gave for that prediction was that the traditional funding sources to groups like the Hamas and the Jihad have actually been cut off. Many of the funding sources came from America. The American government since 9/11 and since the second Intifada has gone to great lengths to try to prevent funding getting to these groups. Now, the result is that these groups, therefore, have to go and find alternative funding. Where else is there to go but to the Wahabi movements in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. And we were saying to the intelligence and the diplomats several weeks ago that we could see that within a very short time the target was also going to be

Americans, Westerners, and Western society by Palestinian groups. We all know, in funding any project, our funders often place quite strict requirements on how their funding is used. And we know for a fact that funding from the Wahabi sources states quite categorically that this Intifada, this battle, this opposition must not just be against Israel, but the West generally. So, now we have a name of a new splinter group which has broken off from Jihad Islami and Hamas which is now committed to actually killing Americans as well, and sadly, we knew this was going to happen.

What we are going to do about it is very difficult, because, you know, one of the problems is--and here the American Administration is absolutely crucial--we can actually see historically how super powers--or the super power and, to a certain extent, Britain as well--have actually helped the creation of some of these extremist groups by the way it dealt with the other. Now for the Americans to go and start shouting at Arafat and saying that he must do this and this is really not in order, because they do not recognize him [as having legitimate authority]. If they don't recognize him and they don't talk to him, why should they expect him to do anything? And I think whilst we refuse to deal with the only democratically elected leader within the Middle East because we don't like him, we are going to continually run into these problems. A strengthened Palestinian security force cannot actually come from a disempowered Arafat, and what the U.S. Administration is trying to do at the moment is to disempower him, and the empowerment of others is a highly complex process. We mustn't just try to empower the secular leaders, we also need to empower the religious leaders, and they need to feel that they have a means of communicating with the U.S. Administration.

Just two and a half weeks ago, I took some of the U.S. diplomats to the Shia court in Bethany, the place of Lazarus' resurrection, and there they sat down with Sheik Taysir Tammimi. He said categorically that Arafat knew about this meeting, and he had given approval for this meeting to take place under the umbrella of the Alexandrian process, but I think this is going to be an increasing problem; we have to deal with Arafat. There isn't anybody else to deal with.

U.S. Christians and the Mideast

Chase:

As you know, many Christians in the United States during the 20th century have cultivated a strong support for Israel. Indeed, there is a strong Christian Zionist movement in this country. What kind of insights would you urge upon U.S. Christians in order to support and empower Palestinian leadership? You speak very passionately about empowering and respecting Palestinian leadership, both religiously and politically, how would you encourage American Christians to do that? Why?

White:

The first thing, the most important thing, is not to fall into the trap of immediately demonizing the other. Most American Christians don't know the first thing about Yasser Arafat or those around him. They just simply hear the propaganda: he is a terrorist; he is behind these terrorist activities. The reality is that he is not behind them. He may sometimes hinder a process to deal with them, but he is not behind the terrorists' activities. And it is almost as if we need to pinpoint one individual and person to blame for all these problems. What we need to do as Christians is to love both peoples of the land, both the people of Israel and the Palestinian people. The Christians have a particular responsibility also to the Christians. They have a responsibility to understand them, to support them, to stand with the Palestinian Christians as we have a special responsibility to the Jews because of our covenant relationship with them, because of God's everlasting covenant with them and for all the reasons that they support Israel. But just because you support Israel does not mean that you cannot support the Palestinian people, and that you cannot support the Palestinian Christians. And sadly, people have fallen into this trap of thinking that if you are for one people, it means that you must be against the other.

Chase:

Many U.S. Christians also have a strong sense of evangelism; they pray that people of other faiths will convert to Christianity. Some Christians wonder, therefore, how Christians can even be involved in a reconciliation process that in a sense, or in effect, supports the assumptions or the premises of Judaism and Islam in contrast to the truths of Jesus Christ. How do you respond? How would you help us to see participation in interfaith dialogue as being as important as missionary activity that seeks conversion? You probably don't see those as being opposed.

White:

No, I don't see them as being opposed. But once again, we are very forgetful about the nature of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus told us that the Samaritan was our neighbor. Who was the Samaritan? The Samaritan was a heretic. They didn't believe the right thing. They worshipped in the wrong place. They did everything wrong, and Jesus said that person is our neighbor. And so whether that person is a Jew or Muslim, we do have a relationship with them. We have a relationship that has to be based on how Jesus would relate to those people. And Jesus always had the hardest words to say against hypocrisy within His own faith tradition. He didn't look at the other and criticize them. Looking at the other, He was always open. He was always welcoming. He was always willing to engage. He was always willing to forgive. Those He was hardest on were His own people. So in many respects, those we should be hardest on are those in the Church who do not walk clearly in the way of Jesus. It is so easy for people to just hold on to their key favorite texts without seeing the broader pattern and image of the nature of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Dialogue and Interfaith Relations

Chase:

Describe a bit more about the process of dialogue. How do you know when you are in genuine interfaith dialogue? What are its features?

White:

For me, the kind of relationships I have with other faith leaders is so different from what happens in the interfaith world. I often say that most interfaith gatherings are nice people sitting down talking with nice people. Well, most of my work begins with fairly horrible people sitting down talking to horrible people, horrible because they are caught up in some kind of war. Or they might not be horrible people-they might be very nice people-but they are still people who are hurting, people who are broken by violence-often very, very intense violence. So in my work, there is always a very specific objective, not just, "Let's sit down and be nice to each other," but "how do we stop killing each other?" It is very different from what people may consider an interfaith encounter. You know, this isn't cucumber sandwiches and cups of tea on the mayor's lawn, which is so often how these interfaith activities happen. These are hard-core negotiations trying to stop people killing, literally massacring, each other.

Chase:

What kinds of interactions do you want these participants to have? They are going to be strong advocates for their faith traditions and for their positions. Do you look for people to give in, do you look for people to find common ground, do you look for people to listen? What are some of the characteristics you look for?

White:

One of the key characteristics is to enable each side to hear the pain of the other. I think it was Longfellow who once said that there was enough pain in the world to bring healing to every situation if only we could know the pain of the other. So, that is often one of the crucial keys, when you actually listen and hear and emphasize and understand the pain of the other. But, so often there are barriers that prevent people from even beginning to hear the pain of the other, because immediately when they hear the pain of the other they enter into a

competition of pain—who has suffered most, who has had the most people killed—and as you hear the litany of the suffering continue, it is almost as if the worst suffering makes that person a winner today. And then tomorrow, there is another suicide bombing and the winner that day may be somebody else who gains the most.

Chase:

How do we break the cycle of competition?

White:

This is the key—how to break that cycle of the competition of pain. It comes when there is a real encounter with the other and when the other stops becoming an enemy, but a friend. I often give the example of two of the key people I work with, Rabbi Michael Melchior the former deputy from our ministry for Israel, our chief rabbi, the rabbi of Norway actually, and Sheik Tal El Sader. And Sheik Tal El Sader, a sheik from Hebron, former Minister of State within the Palestinian Authority, he was being totally and utterly bombarded by the Arab press at a meeting one day. After just sitting and listening to all of this for a while, he took Rabbi Melchior's hand and said, "Rabbi Melchior is my brother. He is not my friend, he is my brother, and we are going to walk this long and difficult road together until we find peace together. And eventually, we will, because," he said, "My job is to pull up the thorns along this difficult road and to plant flowers." Now this Sheik Tal El Sader was the founder of the Hamas. He was one of the people who started one of the most evil militant organizations in the world. Now, to see somebody like that and to see how they have changed means that anybody could change. And if we just condemn everybody and say, "It is impossible, they are evil, they are terrorists, they can't change," then we are saying that the work of the Cross is not all sufficient and that our God cannot intervene and change people's life. My belief and trust in God is very simple, but my God is a very big God and a very great God, and however awful an individual is that I am being with, I really believe that God can change them, and I think sometimes we have to rely on the supernatural work of God to change individuals, because what we can do ourselves, even as mediators, is limited.

Dialogue in Iraq

Chase:

We only have a few minutes left, Andrew. Let's talk a bit more practically about your current work in Iraq. You are establishing an institute for reconciliation in Iraq.

White:

The Iraqi Institute for Religious Tolerance, which will be the official organ working between the coalition provisional authority and Iraqi religious leaders.

Chase:

Why form an institute? What kind of structure are you looking to create, and what actually will it do?

White:

Well, the most important thing is that I am not creating this, but this is actually the suggestion of the local Ayatollahs themselves. One of the things that we as the coalition—talking now on the side of the British and the Americans, or should I say the Americans and the British—want to encourage is local institution building. A nation which has been under dictatorship for so many years is lacking in institutions because everything was controlled by the Mukhabarat, the intelligence and the regime. So what we need to do is to begin to establish a new forum whereby they can actually themselves begin to deal with intolerance, prevent intolerance, and to deal with some of the very negative external influences which are coming into the country—whither they be from the Shia in Iran or the Wahabi in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Chase:

So it will literally be an institution that will facilitate discussion and dialogue?

White:

It will facilitate dialogue. It will work with the government. It will try to prevent the work of the militants from taking root. And it will try and present an Iraqi middle liberal road whereby people can be faithful to their religious traditions but at the same time be tolerant of the other.

Chase:

Andrew, thank you very much. We appreciate your time here this morning, and thank you for your visit to Wheaton's campus, and look forward to your coming back again.

White:

Thank you very much.