***A Battle of Beliefs - a matter of life and death***

***A Premier Lecture*:**

**Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King. June 17th 2016.**

***David Alton: Lord Alton of Liverpool.***

**It’s a great pleasure to deliver a lecture for Premier Radio. I have been a supporter since its foundation.**

**It’s even more of a pleasure to share a platform with Premier’s Martyn Eden, an old friend, alongside whom I have campaigned for thirty years on issues of human life, human rights and human dignity.**

**Having spent the past 37 years in Parliament – in one House or the other – and given her remarkable dedication to humanitarian causes, at the very outset I want to pay my respects to the memory of Jo Cox, Member of Parliament, who was murdered yesterday.**

**Her husband Brendan, in a poignant tribute said their family and friends would redouble their efforts *“to fight against the hate that killed Jo”***

**At a time when politicians are so often reviled or despised just keep in mind what Brendan said about Jo: that *“Jo believed in a better word and she fought for it every day of her life with energy and a zest for life that would exhaust most people”*; that *“Hate doesn’t have a creed, race or religion”* and that we must unite to contest *“the hatred that killed her.”***

**Well, Premier – perhaps unwittingly - could not have chosen a more appropriate location in which to ask me to talk about what has shaped my own beliefs and why I believe the battle of beliefs has become a defining issue of our times.**

**Our beliefs – which we have no right to impose on others and which must sit peaceably alongside those of others - are shaped by intellectual curiosity, interior comprehension, and by experience.**

**This is not a contest between intellect and faith – it is about both.**

**In parenthesis, I am always struck by how many astronauts have returned from space and devoted their lives to religious faith. Having seen Planet Earth from a distance, not to mention glimpsing infinity, Neil Armstrong, who was fiendishly clever, said simply *"I am a deist"* and remarkedthat he was more excited at walking in places where Jesus had walked in Jerusalem than walking on the moon.**

**But how do the stones of this building speak to me or influence what I believe?**

**This Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King – in the crypt of which, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, we are gathered - was built with the pennies of the poor – from as far away as the impoverished rural villages in Ireland, like the Irish-speaking part of Mayo from which my mother came – and who gave generously of their meagre incomes to build a cathedral that would give glory and honour to God.**

**But the cathedral was also built to memorialise and commemorate the many immigrants who died on this very site – for here stood the workhouse – built in 1769 and expanded in 1840s and becoming one of the largest in the country with 3,000 inmates and at times as many as 5,000. Here, thousands died of cholera, typhoid and disease as they fled a famine which claimed one million lives and drove out three million others from their homes.**

**Here, thousands died on penury, grinding poverty and destitution.**

**At the height of the famine, in 1847, no fewer than 1,280, mainly Irish, people died in Liverpool. There were 20,000 street children. Dr. Duncan, the City’s pioneering public health officer estimated that some 100,000 people were living in abject conditions and fever sheds were erected and two ships moored here in the Mersey as lazarettos, as hospitals for the diseased poor. In the nearby parish of St. Mary’s in one week there were 166 burials of Irish Catholics; 105 of them were children. The coroner described the homes of one woman, Sarah Burns, who died two days before Christmas:**

**“*The floor was composed of mud; in that hovel there were seventeen human beings crowded together without even so much as a bit of straw to lie down on.”***

**3,000 people were crammed into the workhouse - here within the compass of the walls of this very crypt.**

**But into this seemingly hopeless situation stepped some singular men and women of faith, with beliefs that animated them.**

**Men like the Canon Nugent and the Anglican clergyman, Major Lester, with whom a he forged a deep friendship. James Nugent worked for over fifty years to rescue children from the streets of Liverpool and he founded many institutions for the poor and needy. He was an early ecumenist – reaching across Liverpool’s sectarian divide to work with the city’s Protestant leaders. He also mobilised Jewish and Unitarian humanitarians and philanthropists, pioneering educational initiatives, challenging priorities, and zealously insisting of the dignity of the city’s masses of abandoned waifs and strays.**

**Fr.Nugent wrote: *“Wherever you turned you saw crowds of dirty, shoeless, naked children. It would seem as if they were Nobody’s Children.”***

**He movingly noted that “*the birds of the air have their resting places and the very dogs have their warm kennels, but these poor little ones huddle together under railway arches, in empty boxes, under theatre show boards, over bakers’ ovens – in fact anywhere to get a little heat and protection from the frosty and nipping night air.”***

**Nugent’s real genius lay in galvanising not only his own community but in forging alliances with likeminded people; in identifying the greatest contemporary evil and then single-mindedly setting himself the task of doing something about it.**

**Those men and women who died within these walls might well have despaired and asked *“Where is God in all of this?*”**

**I might well have done.**

**But of course the real question that events posed then was the same question that we must ask now – from Syria to the corpse laden beaches of the Mediterranean.**

**It is not “*where is God?”* but *“where are the people with power and resources who can put right this man-made suffering?”***

**If I despair of anyone it’s not in God but in man.**

**The events which took place here teach us that God wasn’t to blame for the suffering *and* that to mitigate the litany of daily horrors it would take religious people to put their beliefs into action: Faith, Hope and Charity - three timeless impulses which every society and every age – need to inform their thinking and actions.**

**It’s because I am the son of an immigrant – as well as the son of a Desert Rat and a nephew of an uncle who gave his life fighting Nazism – that I so strongly disagree with those who caricature, stigmatise, and scapegoat those fleeing war, and even genocide, as spongers and scroungers – and, forgetting the lessons of *Kinder transport,* who even refused to provide a place of refuge for unaccompanied refugee children.**

**Last year, 25,000 unaccompanied children arrived in Europe and Europol say 10,000 have gone missing - missing into what? Trafficking, exploitation, abuse and total neglect. On Monday in the House I challenged the Government to say what has happened to these missing 10,000 children.**

**Today, worldwide, 55 million people are refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced persons, with a further 60 million forcibly displaced.**

**Some 1.5 billion of the world’s people live in countries that are fragile and affected by conflict. This is a global problem which is not going to go away and will not be abated until it is tackled at its roots – not by putting poultices on the problem.**

**We are more likely to wrestle with this catastrophe if we remember our own story and know who we are.**

**When the workhouse was closed in 1925 and demolished in 1931 this, then, was the obvious place to build a house of prayer, where wounds might be healed and old wrongs forgiven.**

**I loathe the injunction to *“forgive and forget”.* Far better to “*forgive and remember”* – and then work to avert today’s calamities.**

**In remembering the origins of this place it is also worth reflecting that when planning permission was sought to build a cathedral here it was opposed on purely sectarian grounds by the Reverend Councillor Harold Longbottom.**

**When the question was put, he won, but the following year, political control changed and, this time, he lost, by one vote. It led the then Archbishop to wryly remark that “*it was better to have won by a hair’s breadth than to have lost by a Longbottom*.”**

**How far off those sectarian days – when the city’s two Christian leaders even refused to publicly say the Lord’s Prayer together – now seem.**

**Those of us who were among the one million who gathered here in Liverpool at Pentecost in 1982 watched as Pope John Paul first prayed in the Anglican cathedral and then, with Bishop David Shepard and Archbishop Derek Worlock, travelled the length of the appropriately named Hope Street. We knew that the tectonic plates had moved and that history was being healed.**

**Today their achievement in creating a new paradigm based on mutual respect and co-operation is commemorated in Hope Street in Stephen Broadbent’s open door statue.**

**Replacing sectarian discord with an open door and open mind doesn’t mean that different beliefs have been abandoned, nor should it, but it has led to a greater *respect* for *difference* and a willingness to learn to live alongside one another – and a greater willingness to stand in another’s shoes, all I short supply today.**

**Derek Worlock, who was my constituent and great encourager, and coined the phrase that *“it’s better together”* is buried here in the chapel of St.Joseph.**

**This place also has other significance for me.**

**My four children were born very nearby and two of them were christened in the baptistery.**

**And the Cathedral parish was in the constituency which I represented in the House of Commons for 18 years and before that as a County and City Councillor – many people living in great hardship facing all the challenges of inner city urban life – from chronic unemployment to drug abuse. Half the homes in my Low Hill Council Ward, where I was elected as a student, aged 21, had no inside sanitation; half the streets still had gas lighting.**

**But these same people were also the ones who would give their last halfpenny if asked to help someone in dire straits.**

**They were fiercely loyal and took their faith seriously. Yes, there were plenty of mistakes - and what theologians would no doubt call sins – but extended families rallied round and a tangled network of grandparents, aunts and uncles would be on hand to help out.**

**Nearby, too, is my university office and the Roscoe Foundation for Citizenship which I founded at Liverpool John Moores University nearly twenty years ago.**

**In developing a programme of civic engagement it has actively promoted open and free speech and encouraged the celebration of citizenship which works for the common good.**

**So*, where we are,* matters greatly to me; not least because it helps to inform the more important question: *“who am I?”***

**Isaiah tells us that we must always *“remember the rock from which you are hewn.”***

**The Exodus discourse between God and Moses revolves around the central question *“Who am I?”* while Croesus, the King of the Lydians asked the Oracle at Delphi, *“what’s the most important thing a man should know?”***

***“Know who you are”* came the reply.**

**But *do* we, any longer, really know who we are? It’s clearly a question that doesn’t even cross the mind of those approving the industrialised manufacture of human embryos, some with several parents?**

**Knowing who we are is fundamental to our wellbeing – individually and collectively.**

**In the battle of beliefs to which I will devote my remarks this evening a central proposition is that we have *forgotten* who we are; that our Judaeo-Christian beliefs have been *central* to our identity;  and that, when we suffer from collective *amnesia* and  seek to erase our identity, we weaken and undermine the whole basis of our society.**

**In a recent Guardian Editorial ( remarkably) it was  conceded how human rights and so much that we now take for granted came from Christianity:**

***“The idea that people have some rights just because they are human, and entirely irrespective of merit, certainly isn’t derived from observation of the world. It arose out of Christianity, no matter how much Christians have in practice resisted it. Although human rights have become embedded in our institutions at the same time as religious observance has been in decline, they could become vulnerable in an entirely post-Christian environment where the collective memory slips from the old moorings inherited from Christian ethics.”***

**The conclusion is correct. You can’t remove the foundations from under a house and expect it to stay standing.**

**When we forget and destroy our Christian heritage we weaken the foundations of universal human rights, and the value of individual participation in democracy. This is exactly why there is such an uneasy fit with democratic governance in Islamic States and why democracy is facing such a crisis in the secularising West.**

**My second proposition will be that all over the world Christianity, in particular, is under attack from a pincer movement of aggressive secularisation, on one hand, and religious movements that have embraced violence, on the other.**

**Remaining true to their beliefs is quite literally a matter of life and death.**

**Implicit in both my propositions is that if we *remember* who we are, and weigh the price that has been, and is being, paid, we might surely *conclude* that a faith and beliefs worth *dying* for might be worth *living* for.**

**Turning to the first of those propositions: our forgotten identity and identity crisis.**

**We are all too sadly aware of what happens to loved ones when they contract Alzheimer’s disease, and the distress to which this diagnosis leads.**

**If we truly love our country should we not be equally distressed to see a nation forgetting *who* it is and incapable of recognising what was once cherished and loved.**

**Let me give an example of what I mean.**

**Just down the hill from here, in Seel Street, is one of one of Liverpool’s oldest churches, now closed and used as a night club and bar.**

**Sadly, for much of 21st century Britain this may better represent their values and beliefs than what went before.**

**And politicians, who have encouraged, through legislation, a frenzy of seven day a week drinking and trading, shouldn’t be surprised that it’s not only buildings that have morphed into something else.**

**Instead of a belief in God we are encouraged to simply believe in our own autonomy: *“my right to choose*” is the** *leitmotif* **against which we are told to live our lives.**

**It’s about me, not you, rights not duties, choices not consequences, and always the more powerful taking precedence over the powerless.**

**Take a look at the tatterdemalion society that has emerged.**

**Do we think that a nation where 800,000 children have no contact with their fathers or where broken homes are becoming the norm is so much better than *“until death we do part”?***

**Do we feel good about a country where around 2,000 people are sleeping rough in England tonight; where 84,900 households (which may contain more than one person) are classified as homeless; or where 85,000 people languish in our jails?**

**Do we recognise a country where individuals now owe more in debt than the wealth generated by the entire country in a year. People in the UK owed a staggering £1.475 trillion at the end of April 2016.**

**Every day in the UK close to 300 people are either declared bankrupt or insolvent, - one person every five minutes and twelve seconds. Citizens Advice say they are dealing with 6500 new debt cases every working day.**

**This indebtedness is often driven by an intense materialism whereby people define themselves by their possessions – with their particular mobile phone, for instance, expressing and defining their image and how they want to be perceived. It speaks to a terribly hollow view of life. With apologies to Descartes *“I shop, therefore I am.”***

**Or how do we feel about a Britain where an estimated 1 million elderly people who do not see a friend or neighbour during an average week?; where Baroness (Mary) Warnock, one of Britain’s most influential philosophers gave us a glimpse of what tomorrow may be like. Talking of the elderly and sick she said in *The Times* that: *“If you’re demented, you’re wasting people’s lives—your family’s lives—and you’re wasting the resources of the NHS”.* A brave New Britain, a brave – or rather chilling – new world.**

**And what a contrast with the principles and legacy of Dame Cicely Saunders the remarkable Christian woman who pioneered the hospice movement.**

 **A Britain which now prides itself in jettisoning Judaeo-Christian beliefs is one where five million images of child abuse are in circulation on the internet, featuring some 400,000 children; where 600 of our unborn children are aborted every day – some up to birth; where last year 660 million antidepressants were issued at a cost of nearly £6 billion to the NHS; where in one recent year Samaritans answered 4.6 million calls from people in despair - one call every seven seconds, where suicide accounts for 20 per cent of all deaths among young people aged 15 to 24; where more than 140,000 people attempt to commit suicide every year; where 7 million are now living alone in Great Britain – entirely unprecedented in our history.**

**Family breakdown – not just migration – has led to this huge pressures for additional accommodation but also to toxic loneliness.**

**How right was the learned rabbi, Hillel, when he said: *"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But*if I am only for myself*, who am I? “***

**As Christians who stood against the atheism of the former Communist Soviet Union knew, you could tell when a tank was coming your way. In our materialistic, throw away culture – where we dispose of everything from our families to our unborn children - the devil arrives in carpet slippers.**

**C.S.Lewis famously said that his greatest victory of the 20th century was convincing people that he didn’t exist.**

**All this has accompanied the trend in Britain towards a very narrow and ideological form of secularisation.**

**Faith is replaced by the belief of nobody, taught by anybody and paid for by everybody. Or, as G.K.Chesterton put it: *“When men stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything.”***

**On no account, teach us what you really believe.**

**If you do, you will probably end up like the two Scottish midwives who lost their jobs because, on conscience grounds, they refused to carry out abortions; or like the environmental scientist who lost his job because he refused to monitor the hospital stack where some of the 8 million unborn babies killed over the past 50 years have been burnt.**

**Freedom of conscience is the bone marrow of a free, democratic society and, alas, the day has come in the UK where we can no longer live and act on the basis of our beliefs and values. How can we say we are free?**

**More subtly, the same attempts to emasculate faith and belittle religious belief leads to little serious study of theology in most universities while many media outlets do their best to air brush out beliefs that have not withstood the scrutiny of the Islington wine bar.**

**In the popular imagination this eradication of the Christian faith spawns Mary and the magic baby or the festival of Wintermas.**

**As so often is the case, it is our former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan (Lord) Sacks, who reminds us to be true to ourselves. He says this about our emasculation of the Christian faith:**

***“This is not yet, but it comes close to, self-hatred … It represents the breakdown of an identity, and nothing good can come of it”.***

**He warns how it happens:**

***“”””then it became valuing all cultures equally, a completely different proposition. Then it became valuing all cultures except your own. That is when it becomes pathological. You cannot value all cultures except your own … one who does not respect himself cannot confer respect on others”.***

**We who know our story know that the Christian faith is part of this nation’s DNA and that a repudiation of our identity is indeed perilously close to self-hatred.**

**Let me mention an experience of the young Thomas Merton,** **author of *Seven Storey Mountain,* after a visit to the sites of Yorkshire’s great medieval monastic houses.**

**He reflected on whether any of the picnickers, sitting in the beautiful grounds of the still awe-inspiring ruins of Fountains Abbey, chewing on their sandwiches and drinking from their Thermos flasks, ever used their imaginations to think about what the cycles of daily prayer and had represented  - and how great British saints like Bede, Cuthbert, and Aidan had used religious communities to create schools, repositories of learning keeping civilisation alive during centuries of barbarism, hospices, places of hospitality, and places of work and prayer.**

**How could you sit in the beautiful surroundings of the 12th century Augustinian Bolton Abbey Priory, in the Yorkshire Dales, and not imagine the rich calligraphy of the monks with their vellum and quills illuminating the Scriptures and manuscripts and, in defiance of the Dark Ages, gathering books in their great libraries; or not think about life defined by feasts and seasons or by the rhythm and order of the Divine Office – taken from the Lord’s command that we pray without ceasing, making a reality of the Psalmist’s words: *“Seven times a day I praise you.”***

**British Christians kept learning alive – creating hospitals, universities, hospices and a nationwide network of parishes that honoured God and welded the nation together.**

**And in every generation, when they have remembered the Lord’s call to be salt and light they have renewed and remade our society.**

**Think of Wilberforce and the abolitionist movement who ended slavery – many were Christians, working with Quakers and Unitarians, such as Liverpool’s William Roscoe, born and buried a stones-throw away from here in Mount Pleasant.**

**Think of Shaftesbury and his campaign to end the horror of children being sent down the mines, his creation of ragged schools and the first asylums for the mentally ill.**

**Or, in politics think of the men and women of faith – from Gladstone, born in neighbouring Rodney Street, to Keir Hardie, the first independent Labour MP, to admirable contemporary parliamentarians like Frank Field and Shirley Williams.**

**Back in 1989 Martyn and I spent a cold Epiphany weekend staying in a present day monastery in Gloucestershire; and politics was on our minds.**

**A group of Evangelical and Catholic lay people had come together to discuss the challenges facing Britain.**

**We formulated the Westminster Declaration which said Christians should enter the political fray and work for the common good - for the six principles of social justice, empowerment, active compassion, good stewardship, reconciliation and respect for life.**

**All of these principles flow from the Judaeo Christian belief that every human being – from the womb to the tomb – is made in God’s unique image.**

**So, regardless of your abilities, your class, your colour, gender, age, orientation or creed you are made in His image. How could he therefore do other than want you to live and to have dignity and worth? How to interpret that is the call which is placed on us.**

**As we have lost our identity we can see the effects on our social ecology, in civic disaggregation and in community incohesion.**

**It is into this enfeebled and weakened environment that religious radicalism has entered.**

**It is a violent and horrific phenomenon which is now wreaking havoc around the world and which is the greatest global challenge.**

**My second proposition.**

**A few years ago I invited a brave young Muslim to come and talk to me. He is Ed Hussain, the author of the book*, “The Islamist”.***

**He had been a member of Hizb-ut-Tahir.**

**He reminded me of my friend, Liam McCloskey, who had been an INLA member and was the last of the hunger strikers in the Maze after Bobby Sands. In his cell Liam read some of the gospels and knew that what he had been engaged in had nothing to do with his proclaimed religious affiliation.**

**He walked away from violence and was one of those who worked for the peace agreement in Northern Ireland.**

**In the same way, Ed Hussain knew you couldn’t plant bombs on the London underground or in Paris, or behead non-believers or forcibly convert people and say that this was part of a religion of peace.**

**In his words, he said that his motive in writing his book was to expose…**

***“the appeal of extremist thought, how fanatics penetrate Muslim communities and the truth behind***

***their agenda of subverting the West and moderate Islam.”***

**He said:**

***“Five years later, after much emotional turmoil, I rejected fundamentalist teachings and returned to normal life and my family.”***

**Reflecting on why he feels comfortable in Britain, he said**

***“I am proud Britain never became a godless, communist land. We fought two world wars to protect the history, culture and people, not to see what makes it British eroded because of spineless politicians too scared to say "Christmas" in public.***

***“Millions of Muslims and others feel welcome here because of our similar beliefs in Jesus, God, and the afterlife. Even if people do not share those religious beliefs, they can still be part of the Christmas spirit.***

**Someone else who shared that outlook was a shopkeeper, Asad Shah, who was murdered at Easter outside his shop in Glasgow. He often reached out to Christian neighbours and customers. The man accused of killing him, Tanveer Ahmed, allegedly drove up from Bradford to kill Mr.Shah because he said he was disrespectful of Islam. Mr. Shah was an Ahmadi who, in Pakistan, are denied citizenship unless they renounce their description of themselves as Muslims. Now, it seems, they are to be targeted in Britain.**

**Last month I was guest of honour at this city’s refurbished Pakistan Centre. It was a wonderful evening of celebration.**

**Pakistan’s green and white flag was designed to represent the green of Islam and the white of the minorities**

**In 1947, Pakistan’s great statesman and founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah crafted a constitution which promised to uphold plurality and diversity and to protect all its citizens.  Jinnah said: “You may belong to any religion, caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State…Minorities, to whichever community they may belong, will be safeguarded. Their religion, faith or belief will be secure. There will be no interference of any kind with their freedom of worship. They will have their protection with regard to their religion, faith, their life and their culture. They will be, in all respects, the citizens of Pakistan without any distinction of caste and creed**

**They are values not just for Pakistan but for us too. They are values under attack and we do one another no favours by failing to say so.**

1. **The assassination, five years ago, of the country’s Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti – a Christian - was the curtain raiser for an orgy of bombings, killings, rapes, imprisonment and abductions, of which the Lahore massacre is the latest bloody and shocking example. Bhatti was murdered for questioning why people like an illiterate Catholic woman, Asia Bibi, had been sentenced to death under the country’s blasphemy laws and for proposing reform or repeal of those laws.**

**Earlier this year I launched a report in Parliament which catalogues the systematic campaign targeting Pakistan’s religious minorities, particularly Christians and Ahmadis, a campaign played out in a culture of impunity. The report followed evidence taking sessions, witness statements, and a visit I made to a detention centre where escaping Pakistani Christians are held.**

 **One escapee recounted how his friend, Basil – a pastor’s son – was targeted by Pakistani Islamists attempting to convert him.**

**He reminded them that there should be no compulsion in requiring religious adherence. Their response was to launch an arson attack on his home. The fire destroyed his home and Basil, his wife and daughter, aged 18 months, were burnt alive.**

**Following their deaths the assailants turned their attention to his friend.**

**He was attacked and beaten. He reported this to the police – who then informed the assailants of the complaint. The assailants telephoned him and said that they would kill him. He, his wife, and little girl, fled the country.**

 **In the aftermath of this systematic campaign of visceral hatred there is little evidence that Pakistan’s contemporary leaders are doing anything whatsoever to uphold Jinnah’s vision – and, equally, there is little evidence that more than £1 billion of British aid, given over the past two years, is doing anything to support beleaguered minorities, often the poorest of the poor, or to promote religious freedom or peaceful co-existence.**

 **Just as disturbing as the UK Government’s refusal to describe the annihilation of Christians in Iraq and Syria as the genocide that it patently is, in Pakistan they say Christians in Pakistan merely experience “discrimination” not persecution. The Government – elected on a pledge to help persecuted Christians - should tell the grieving, mourning, families of Lahore how they come to that conclusion.**

**And what of outright genocide?**

**A century ago the world witnessed the Armenian genocide, in which between 800,000 and 1.5 million Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Assyrian Christians lost their lives.**

**Today a genocidal campaign continues in the same region against Yazidis and Christians and other groups who are *“different.”***

**On Tuesday of this week, in Parliament. I raised the report, published in *The Times*, of the public burning, in Mosul, by ISIS, of 19 Yazidi girls who had refused to become sex slaves.**

**ISIS hold 3000 other women and girls from the religious minorities. A young Yazidi woman, Pari Ibrahim, who has seen 21 men and 19 women from her family murdered, came to see me on Monday described the mourning which has gripped her community in the aftermath of last week’s primeval burnings—which were driven, of course, by ISIS’s ideological hatred of difference.**

**Yet not a single person has been brought to justice and what are we doing to liberate those women and girls? And how many returning Jihadis are now concealing themselves in our midst – ready no doubt to commit the sort of atrocity we saw in Orlando this week?**

**And to what other excesses does this hateful ideology – which vilifies and despises difference – lead?**

**A few months ago I hosted a meeting of the charity, *Aid to the Church In Need.* We heard of how a Christian pastor in a village of Aleppo was told to convert or die and was forced to watch as his 12-year-old son was tortured before his eyes, the boys fingers cut from his hand. Neither the father or son renounced their faith, and both were executed.**

**I have been campaigning, with the invaluable help of Premier, for a formal genocide to be declared against ISIS for the atrocities committed in Iraq and Syria and this week my Genocide Bill was given a First Reading in Parliament.**

**Despite Resolutions being passed in the House of Commons, the American Congress, the European Parliament and the Australian House of Representatives, our Government lamentably still fails to name these events for what they are or to lay a Resolution before the Security Council. And I renew my call again for them to do so.**

**While ISIS genocide in Syria and Iraq may simply be seen as inhumane butchery, this is fundamentally an attack on freedom of conscience and belief.  ISIS work in a consistent manner, not only killing men, women and children, but destroying their holy places, and doing their utmost to eradicate any collective memory of a people’s very existence.**

**But where are the protests? Why are we so reluctant to speak out?**

**Nina Shea, an International Human Rights Lawyer, says:- *“Our churches, at the local level, which have been largely silent up till now, must now actively engage for this campaign to succeed. Where are the widespread demonstrations? Where are letters by their thousands to political leaders to do more?  Where are the spontaneous grassroots campaigns?  I don't see them…If just 1% of Christians were outraged and mobilized we would see political action across the board."***

**Remember, too, that with a religious war, reminiscent of seventeenth century battles in Europe, raging between Sunnis and Shias, Muslims suffer too – and not just at each other’s hands.**

**On my last visit to Burma I travelled to a village mosque which, had been set on fire the night before by a Buddhist militia – driven from a village in which they had peacefully lived alongside Buddhist for generations.**

**Tonight we should  stand with those who are suffering or dying for their beliefs – with the Christians of the Middle East; with the Iranian, Saeed Abedini, who was imprisoned for 10 years for *“undermining national security”* by hosting Christian gatherings in his home; with Chinese Christians like the late Bishop Cosmas Shi Enxiang, who died last year at 94 years of age, having spent half his life in prison; with the Chinese Christians who, since the beginning of 2016, have seen 49 of their churches who have seen the Crosses from churches and who destroyed, crosses removed and a pastor’s wife crushed to death in the rubble as she pleaded with the authorities to desist; with the Christians targeted by groups like ISIS, the Taliban, Al Shabab, and Boko Haram.**

**As I come to my conclusion let me end by insisting that we must always *forgive but remember; forgive but act in solidarity with those who suffer.***

***Remember* that thirty years after the Armenian genocide of 1915 those horrors were surpassed by the four great murderers of the 20thcentury—Mao, Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot—all united by their hatred of religious faith. Hitler famously asked, “*Who now remembers the Armenians?”***

**So we know precisely what happens when you choose to forget or feign indifference.**

**The infamies of the 20th century—from the Armenian genocide to the defining depredations of Stalin’s gulags and Hitler’s concentration camps – led to endless horrors:  from the pestilential nature of persecution, demonization, scapegoating and hateful prejudice; and, notwithstanding violence associated with religion, it emerged primarily from ideology, nation and race.**

**It was the bloodiest century in human history with the loss of 100 million lives – and continues today in places like the concentration camps of North Korea – a country I have visited on four occasions, where 300,000 are incarcerated in its gulags – and from where I have hosted evidence taking sessions addressed by brave Christian women like Jean Young Ok and Hea Woo.**

**We need to be far more aware of what drives hatred of difference and intolerance of other people’s beliefs.**

**It manifests itself in the persecution of Christians in more than 100 countries; in a vilification of Muslims; in the reawakening of Anti-Semitism; in the public flogging in Saudi Arabia of the atheist, Raif Badawi or the murder of the atheist bloggers in Bangladesh.**

**Western Governments are often illiterate when it comes to religious faith – and so they don’t understand what motivates people to kill Christian students in Kenya, Shia Muslims praying in a mosque in Kuwait, Pakistani Anglicans celebrating the Eucharist in Peshawar, or British tourists simply on holiday in Tunisia. They just call it terror and we have developed a worrying moral equivalence or timidity to call evil by its name for fear of giving offence.**

**How right is the BBC’s courageous Chief Correspondent, Lyse Doucet, when she says: *"If you don't understand religion - including the abuse of religion - it's becoming ever harder to understand our world."***

**As we ponder on these things we need to frequently remind ourselves that one outcome of the Holocaust was the promulgation, in 1948, of the 30 Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 18 of which insists that:**

***“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”***

**Yes, in the battle of beliefs our lode star should be Article 18 - honoured daily in its breach, evident in new concentration camps, abductions, rape, imprisonment, persecution, public flogging, mass murder, beheadings and the mass displacement of millions of people.**

**And as we stand against these things Jonathan Sacks suggests we should reflect on some of the shared stories of the Abrahamic faiths – not least the displacement stories of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers – and how they can be used to promote mutual respect, coexistence, reconciliation, and the healing of history.**

**Those stories also underline the urgent need for scholars from those faiths to combat the evil being committed in God’s name and to give emphasis to the ancient texts in a way which upholds *the dignity of difference* – the title of one of Lord Sack’s books.**

**If Jews, Muslims, Christians and atheists are no longer to see one another as an existential threat, we need a new narrative – one which is capable of forestalling the unceasing incitements to hatred which pour from the internet and which capture the unformed minds.**

**Not just scholars but the media and policy makers, too, need greater religious literacy and different priorities.**

**Britain is, for all its faults, a  society in which adulterers are not flogged, gays are not executed, women are not stoned for not being veiled, churches are not burned, so-called apostates had not, until recently, been killed, and non-believers are not forced to convert or treated as 'dhimmis' or second-class citizens.**

**In the battle of beliefs – which for so many are a matter of life and death - we know that learning to live together in respect and tolerance - whether we have a religious faith or not – is truly the great challenge of our times.**

**David Alton**

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