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Speech to the Norwich No To Hate-Crime Vigil

Chris Wood

Good evening.

Some of you may be thinking: "What is he doing here? Religion is part of the problem."

And you would be right. Which is one reason I *am* here. The other is that, whatever the origin of the problem, it must surely be a good thing if people from different faiths get together and find out more about each other. Because that's what inter-faith is about: people talking; people developing relationships across confessional divides; people recognising our common humanity and celebrating its diversity.

So, back to the problem.

There is a strong argument that organised religion evolved to do three things:

- Assist in the passing on and maintenance of *a community's* morals (which might be attributed to a god);
- Help bind a community together in opposition to another community (which is probably why war gods are found in all mythologies); and
- Ensure that secular government also controls the community's spiritual power (which is why witches, heretics and non-conformists have been persecuted throughout history).

Organised religion has done these jobs very well. And the impact is clear, here in Norwich as much as anywhere else. We had mass-murder of Jews long before Hitler (in 1190) and Lollard's Pit is a constant reminder of the plight of free-thinkers before the separation of Church and State.

However, religion is more than an organisation and a set of morals. It is, if you go back to the Latin, a reconnection. Religion is about a connection to the Divine, to God or the Gods, to the land and its spirits, to the ancestors, to whatever is beyond our mortal perception. There does seem to be an innate human striving for this connection.

And there is power in the spiritual realm, power which can't be controlled, except by controlling the gateways. Which is why witches, heretics and non-conformists have been persecuted throughout history. Even in ancient Rome, magic done by the priests was part of state-sanctioned religion, that done by ordinary people was witchcraft.

We live in a multicultural society, where Church and State are no longer exactly the same thing and religion itself is challenged by fundamentalist materialism. The 'one true way' approach is no longer tenable. Every route to the Divine is valid and the enlightened approach is to help the seeker to find the right path for them.

If the challenge of scientific materialism has done one good thing for religion and community cohesion, it is that it allows us to see our sacred truths as true in a different way to scientific truth – which means that other people's sacred truths can also be true at the same time.

The future, hopefully, is a time of transfiguration for religions, as they meet and come to terms with one another, without the secular power to back up the fundamentalists. The new religions of the State are money and scientific materialism (an unholy combination, perhaps), which at least allows *us* the freedom to celebrate the diversity of our religious traditions and take common cause with one another.

Norwich InterFaith Link is a small part of that process and I thank you for the opportunity to stand here this evening, hold up my hands to the iniquities perpetrated by religions, and take common cause with the diversity of humanity.

Thank you.