

We must learn from other religions

It is tempting in the current climate to condemn religion as lying at the root of all evil and indeed I have been guilty of supporting this aphorism both around dinner tables and at print.

What we have seen in Palestine, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Kosovo are terrible examples of savage religion inspired by noble causes.

It is also fashionable among liberal intellectuals to despise the simplistic notions put forward by sections of the evangelical Christians - especially when interwoven with a selective right wing morality in the fashion of the neo-cons currently occupying the White House.

Slaw's observation that the simple answer is that there is no simple answer comes to mind every time a brain-splitting hot-headed orator offers naive solutions to the world's problems, whether they come from Communists,

Shites, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews or American presidents.

What athenai and humans are inclined to forget however, is that religion is also at the root of all that is good.

A vivid reminder of this emerged this week with the news that St Stephen's Church, East Twickenham has embarked on a project to join the slum dwellers in New Delhi.

St Stephen's has always been a remarkable centre of energy and enterprise and its popularity has been sustained while others have dwindled.

During my thirty years in the editorial



The Malcolm Richards Column

of this newspaper it was generating more publicity than almost any other place of worship.

Its message has always been emblazoned with *parabe* and its message, if one dimensional view of the world, attracts many loyal and devoted followers who genuinely try to improve conditions and outlook while acknowledging their own flaws and privileged base.

The story that made the headlines last week about the churchgoers trying to replicate the living conditions of some of India's poorest people, "to experience a fraction of what it is like living in squalor", had a particular impact with me as I have just spent 12 days in Mumbai.

It was my third visit to the sub-continent so I was hardened to the scale of the poverty and seemingly impossible task that faces anyone who tries to improve the lot of those whose only hope of survival is to scavenge the detritus of the affluent.

The churchgoers of course can only get a limited experience of slum dwelling - as they are protected from the stinking sewage, chronic overcrowding, deadly mosquitoes and the foul pollution - but at least they are fostering awareness.

The growth of prosperity and the expansion of the middle class which has been widely publicised recently shows up the disparity between the haves and the have nots even more dramatically than when the Beatles in the states drew attention to the spiritual poverty which

lived alongside the abject poverty.

Clearly the efforts of the St Stephen's mission to improve the living conditions for the slum dwellers will be like trying to hold out a leaking bucket with an egg cup - but it should not be underestimated.

We are so lucky living in boroughs like Richmond upon Thames and Hounslow, where starvation is unknown, everybody is well fed and you are hard pressed to find a house that does not have at least three television sets, a fridge and a computer and which does not contain more food than it eats.

The fact that our churches are now approaching the destination laid by the vast majority of the world's population, with a mission to improve them.

But without spicing our empire building exercises by *hara* leading religious doctrines in the process, is a step forward indeed.

We have as much to learn from the philosophies embraced by Sikh, Hindu and Muslim cultures as their followers have from Christ's teachings.

Example is indeed the finest teacher and the fact that worshippers at St Stephen's are demonstrating so effectively that there are more hungry people in India than there are pebbles on Brighton beach, gives hope for the future.

Especially if it is recognised in the context of feeding and clothing the hungry, we must also make ourselves fit for the environmental future so that all our planet can live in peace and comfort.