

Rev. Kenneth Leech



Interview date: 09 _ Mar _ 06

The Reverend Leech has served as a director of the Runnymede Trust, a leading think-tank promoting ethnicity and cultural diversity. He was involved in the foundation of the Christian Socialist Movement and the Jubilee Group - a network of socialist Christians. He was also one of the church's leading experts on drug culture and the social problems it create. After 40 years as a priest and community theologian in Central and East London.

Background of Brick Lane

..... In the mid 14th century there was a plan to build a brick church. It was the second Christian church in East London. They carried the bricks from an old Roman cemetery called the old Lulworth's cemetery. They carried the brick from Lull's worth field which is the Spitalfields now. They carried it to Whitechapel Road, and the highway they carried the bricks became known as the brick Lane. Because the church was made of white bricks, people called it the Whitechapel and then gave its name to the area and eventually to the main road. And that's how Brick Lane and Whitechapel both got their name.

..... The church was burned down in 18th century and rebuilt and burned down again in the 19th century and rebuilt again, and then totally destroyed in the Second World War. Its on the side were the Altab Ali Park now is, and a little bit of it still remain, the gates and the couple of burial stones; otherwise nothing remain of the church.

..... I was involved with youth movement since generally in East End long before that; but I think, my first contact with the Bengali youth movement would have been at the end of the 70s, I remember getting grants from the British Church's Race Relation Funds, for the Bangladesh Youth Front and the Bangladesh Youth Movement. And then later for the Progressive Youth Organization, the Bangladesh Youth Front was based north of Whitechapel, based mainly around Brick Lane, Spitalfields, and the Bangladesh Youth Movement was based south of Commercial Road, off Canon Street Road. And so they covered different geographical areas. Progressive Youth Movement came later, and also the Bangladesh Youth League and one Bangladesh Youth Approach, they were further east. The one I had most contact was the Youth Front, which was led by Shiraz Huq and Rafiq Ullah and the Youth Movement which was led by Jalal Uddin (Rajonuddin Jalal) and the group to the south of the area. And they reflected the different constituencies with Whitechapel road very much divides the two Bengali communities.

..... I think I need to go back some years and the murder of Altab Ali was in 1978 in May. There have been earlier racial killings and racial violence, I think 1969 was a crucial year, because two phrases entered the English vocabulary in that period, and these were phrases that should not be used and not in the dictionaries. One was the term 'skin head' which was not known before 1969 it was connected with the second term which was the term 'Paki bashing'. Now I first heard the term 'Paki bashing' on the Collingwood Estate in Cambridge Heath Road in Bethnal Green, I think probably were it was first used, to describe young people who were involved with attacks on Asians, who were

indiscriminate and lumped together and 'Pakis' and they still are in many places, irrespective of where they actually come from Paki can refer to people from Middle East, refer to people from Bangladesh, just a general abusive term.



..... There was quite a marked increase in racial violence associated with that period in 1969-1970; and there were some racial murders. The importance of the killing of Altab Ali was that, first of all that it happened on an election night, it happened when he was going to vote. But also it came at the time of climax of these long periods of racial attacks, and I suppose you could say it was the last straw. It wasn't the fact that there haven't been any other killings and it will be wrong to say, but it was worst of them all. But it was the one that mobilize the community or one section of the community to protest; and about 4 thousand [7,000 by local Bengali activist] mostly Bengali carried the coffin to Downing Street as a protest. So I think it was a kind of symbolic importance quite apart from the fact of the killing itself. And it eventually led to the renaming of the Park where the Whitechapel had originally stood. And it was renamed Altab Ali Park, in memory of this relatively unknown clothing worker, I mean many people in the East End probably most of the Bengali people didn't knew who he was. And now the park is named after him and it has become very much a kind of place of pilgrimage for the people to remember the victims of racial violence.

..... and it was one of the number of processions, it was very moving and it didn't stand alone, there were many protests, many marches in that period. A number of very well intentioned white activists who joined in the procession, they treated it is a march and they started chanting fascist out, fascist out, fascist out. And I remember some old Bengali man just looking at them with great disapproval and they didn't say shut up, but they just looked, as if to say it is a silent procession and not a political demonstration and they were reduced to silence, this is extraordinary, I never seen the SWP (Socialist Workers Party) reduce to silence so quickly. It dawned on them, this was mentally a commemoration, was mentally a silent witness to the death of Altab Ali.