

Hospitality, not tolerance: Civil society and inter-faith relations

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In current government policy in the UK, there is great emphasis on inter-faith dialogue, encounter and partnership, such as in the government white paper, [*Face to Face and Side by Side: A Framework for Partnership in our Multi-Faith Society*](#).

But while the white paper stresses the importance of social cohesion and social relationships, it lacks any account of how the very relationships it is concerned to uphold are increasingly subordinated to and undermined by the needs of the market and the state.

It should be noted that policy directed at community and inter-faith relations increasingly uses the term "social cohesion" as the ideal it is aiming for, and envisages joint action in terms of joint humanitarian endeavours.

And yet "social cohesion" is itself a strange, apolitical term. It is a term that regards real differences and disagreement, conflict and critique as enemies of healthy social relations, and consequently has no place for institutions and traditions within which real social relationships are necessarily embedded.

"Social cohesion" is a term that suggests an undifferentiated mass of relationships that have no goal or purpose other than to cooperate with the state.

This term could be dismissed as simply an inadequate category, were it not for its use in conjunction with current policies regarding counter-terrorism. The implication, whether intended or not, is that lack of cohesive relationships and cooperation with the state seems to make of any dissenter an "extremist" in need of "de-radicalisation."

In place of social cohesion, I would like to insist on the old fashioned term "civil society" - a contested but conceptually rich term that envisages the housing of social relationships within institutions. Such institutions, particularly religious institutions, embody traditions of belief and practice that are themselves on-going arguments about the good.

The term "civil society" upholds the importance of institutions in mediating between the individual, the state and the market and holds that such mediatory structures are crucial, not only for the health of social relationships, but also for the health of the state and market as well.

I would suggest that the conversation in ethnically diverse and cosmopolitan cities such as London - and to a lesser extent Sydney and Melbourne - needs to move beyond advocating working "side-by-side," and instead should discuss what it means to be part of a robust civil society within which religious groups undertake shared political action in pursuit of goods in common - not to mention where such action may well involve conflict with the priorities and policies of government and business corporations in pursuit of a critical yet constructive relationship with both.

Real encounter, dialogue and understanding is, I would suggest, best generated as a by-product of shared civic action, because in such shared civic action the focus is neither on face-to-face encounter nor even on simply working side-by-side.

Rather, the focus is rightly on the *pursuit and protection of goods in common* - or, to put it another way, it is through the relationships that emerge between people of different faiths and none, as they identify and uphold the things they love and hold dear, that something genuinely worthwhile emerges.

Such common, public action and civic association is part of what it means to participate in civil society, and is best understood as a form of civic or public friendship. And yet civil society itself is constantly under threat by cooption and subordination to the market and the state, so generating such public action is no easy matter.

But I argue that religious institutions, and common action between them, are crucial to invigorating a robust civil society and contradicting the commodification and instrumentalisation of social relationships.

It is the location of inter-faith relations within the context of invigorating civil society and establishing limits to the market and the state - rather than as a response to a security threat, or as a way of negotiating a post-secular settlement, much less as an expression of the need to generate social cohesion or deliver social welfare more efficiently - that gives real urgency to inter-faith relations and its conceptualisation as a civic practice.

It must be acknowledged from the outset that in Europe and North America the church has cultural - and in the UK, legal - priority. It is a historical fact that means churches are not struggling to make sense of their new situation, because they have established institutions, educational and representational processes and wide-ranging relational networks.

There is a tendency by those outside the church to understand this priority in terms of discrimination, and consequently to seek ways to use legislation to create equality between all faiths, whether minority faith traditions themselves want it or not.

As [Tariq Modood](#) and others point out, when it comes to the issue of "Establishment" there is much evidence to suggest such a process of equalisation is not a central concern of non-Christian faith traditions.

From the perspective of minority faith traditions, such a process of equalisation is regarded not as one of levelling up but of levelling down and eventually excluding religion from the public square.

It seems inevitable that, where this priority exists, there will be many instances where, in the context of inter-faith relations, the church is the host and other traditions are the guest.

The motif of hospitality is a very constructive way of framing the relationship between an established and an immigrant tradition.

Within Christianity, hospitality is part of the church's witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the hospitality that weak and sinful humans have received from God. We who bring nothing to our relationship with God echo this in our reception of others.

Thus, within the Christian tradition, there is a consistent and special concern for the weakest and most vulnerable: the poor, the sick and the refugee.

Moreover, the focus on the vulnerable stranger will, on occasion, mean that the church finds itself actively opposed by those who would be, by Christian criteria, inhospitable to the vulnerable stranger.

Hence, the Christian practice of hospitality is often, because of its priorities, irreducibly prophetic, calling into question the prevailing economic, social or political settlement.

However, because of its particular understanding of what hospitality requires, the church is not uncritically welcoming of everyone: a proper evaluation must be made of who, in any particular instance, is the vulnerable stranger to be welcomed.

For Christians, welcoming the vulnerable stranger inherently involves a process of decentring and re-orientation towards God and neighbour. This entails accepting that all our constructions of life are under God's judgement.

Welcoming the other as other is a means by which we respond to God's judgement of human constructions of God and of our sinful perceptions of our neighbours.

Welcoming the stranger re-orientates us to ourselves, our neighbour and to God by placing a question mark over the "way we do things 'round here."

Stories of faithful Roman soldiers and faithless disciples, of heretic women recognising Jesus as the Son of God while the male religiously orthodox authorities fail to see and hear, should alert Christians to how God is often a stranger and so to the possibility that strangers may well be the bearers of God's presence to us.

As Hebrews 13:2 puts it, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

It could be argued that hospitality, whereby one makes room for another, is an inherently patronising way of organising relations between strangers. But a number of responses can be made to such a criticism.

First, hospitality is precisely a way of countering patronising or excluding relations between strangers, because it demands that the hosts become de-centred and transform their understanding of themselves in order both to make room for and to encounter the other. We could draw a contrast with tolerance, which demands no such process.

Second, hospitality refuses the fantasy of some neutral ground on which all may meet as equals: all places are already filled by one tradition or another and so some account of how to cope constructively with asymmetry between "established" and "immigrant" traditions is needed if a common good is to emerge.

Hospitality is a way of framing how such mutual ground can be forged in a context where the space - be it geographic, cultural, or political - is already occupied and no neutral, uncontested place is available.

To be hospitable is not simply to accommodate another, but, on a Christian account at least, it involves a process of re-configuring wherein both oneself and the other change in order that all may encounter God and each other in new ways.

Such mutual transformation necessarily involves loss as the familiar and what counts as "home" is re-negotiated.

In order for new forms of friendship to emerge, a process of grieving is necessary as both guest and host emigrate from the familiar. Such grieving is the prelude to the formation of shared memories, an interdependent identity narrative, and a new place emerging that both guest and host can call home.

Without any account of loss and grief, racist politics and an exclusionary nostalgia gain legitimacy and so the promise of hospitality is never fulfilled.

An example of the hospitality approach I am advocating is the hospice movement and its contribution to the highly contested debate over euthanasia. Dame Cicely Saunders established the first modern hospice explicitly in response to proposals for euthanasia as a form of good care for the suffering-dying.

The basis and rationale for her work were explicitly theological, yet hospice care is open to all and many non-Christians have become active participants in the movement itself and many non-Christian institutions have adopted practices first developed in Christian hospices.

In policy debates about euthanasia, hospices and palliative care embody a genuine alternative to proposals for euthanasia.

Hospices are open to anyone, regardless of their religion, and they benefit society as a whole and constitute an instance of Christian hospitality for some of the most excluded and vulnerable members of society (in this case, the suffering-dying).

More generally, I would distinguish between common action in which the church - for reasons of Establishment, doctrine, or simply providential accident - is the initiator and lead in generating that action and whose tradition of belief and practice sets the terms and conditions of such shared action, and common action that is a negotiated, multi-lateral endeavour.

Within such endeavours we find the basis of an exploratory partnership between faith institutions and those committed to democratic politics.

For faith traditions and the tradition of democratic citizenship constitute moral traditions that propose the best way to prevent the subordination of human flourishing and social relationship to the demands of the market and the state are not law or some other procedure, but through power born out of associating for common action.

The congregation and the *demos* or people are echoes of each other, and neither is an *ochlos* or crowd whose disassociated and disorganised form leaves the individual utterly vulnerable to concerted action upon them by the state or the market.

The Labour movement is a paradigmatic example of the power of congregating for common action, and the early history of the movement illustrates the possibilities of partnership between faith and democratic citizenship.

In the case of the Labour movement, it was democratic accountability brought to bear upon economic rather than political decision-making. The Civil Rights movement is an example of the latter wherein it was the power of congregations, in partnership with others committed to democratic citizenship, that brought accountability to bear, not to the market, but to the constitutional and legal order itself.

However, there is no opposition between inter-faith relations as hospitable politics and the form it takes in the politics of the common good. More often than not, as the example of the hospice movement illustrates, what begins as a form of hospitality grows into a politics of the common good.

The example of broad-based community organising, as exemplified in the work of London Citizens, illustrates this further.

London Citizens is a broad-based community organisation affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation in the United States. It draws together over 150 different institutions, including churches, mosques, Gurdwaras, synagogues, schools, unions and colleges in order to pursue democratic political engagement.

Community organising began life in the UK under the auspices of the Anglican Church and funding from the Church Urban Fund, and in America where it originated, it was hosted and mostly funded by the Roman Catholic Church until it grew into the multilateral initiative it represents today.

Hence a warning must be sounded against destroying the realms of hospitality through over-zealous anti-discrimination legislation, in doing so, we may destroy the possibility of a politics of the common good.

Indeed, rather than an opposition between a politics of hospitality and a politics of the common good, the latter simply involves multiple points of hospitality.

To adapt a metaphor current in discussions of Scriptural Reasoning (a practice of Jewish, Christian and Muslim dialogue), inter-faith relations as a politics of the common good is subsistent on *temples* - authoritative traditions of interpretation and practice - and *houses* -

local, contextually alert places of worship and formation (such as a congregation) - but is itself a *tent*: that is, a mobile, provisional place where faithful witness is lived in conversation with other faiths and those of no faith.

Such a politics is a form of tent-making where a place is formed in which hospitality is given and received between multiple traditions. Sometimes there are issues heard in the tent that can be collectively acted upon and some which cannot, but the encounter with others and their stories informs the sense of what it is like to live on this mutual ground, to dwell together in a given and shared urban space.

The hearing of others interests and concerns in the context of on-going relationship and the recognition that everyone in the tent occupies the same mutual ground fosters the sense that in each other's welfare we find our own.

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