

The power of Interfaith Dialogue



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In the 1970s I was a very young rabbi of a very big congregation in Cape Town South Africa.

This was the era of apartheid, of racial laws and oppression of people simply because of the colour of their skin.

For me as for so many other people of faith, it was obvious that such a system and attitude was in complete contradiction with the fundamental teachings of Scripture and my religion, that affirm that every human being is created in the Divine Image and that human dignity and freedom are inalienable rights born out of our very humanity.

Accordingly, while I myself got involved in many social justice activities; it was also important to me that my community and my heritage be seen to be part of efforts to overcome those racial barriers, ignorance and alienation.

One of the few ways one could bring communities together across racial divides at the time without immediately running afoul of the authorities, was through religion; and so with the help of the leaders of most of the major religious denominations in Cape Town – Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Muslim and Jewish – we founded what we called the Inter-Faith Forum - the Council of Christians, Jews and Muslims; one of the very first of its kind in the world.

So I came to interfaith relations out of my religious commitment to social justice.

But I discovered some enormously important things, as I got to know my counterparts from other faiths. To begin with, I discovered that they were mostly quite ignorant about me and my religious heritage. Much of what they thought they knew about me and my tradition was based on historic and contemporary prejudices and misunderstandings. I realized that interfaith relations were a critical vehicle to overcoming misconceptions about me and my community and thus was definitely in my own self-interest. However as I got to know my colleagues, I realized that *I* had been amazingly ignorant about *them*. I too was a victim of

prejudices and misconceptions. Not only was it right and just, that I know them for who they are, and not misrepresent them; but if I wanted them to really know *me*, I needed to really know *them*!

Moreover this encounter actually required me to **deepen** my own faith and understanding of who I am, in order to truly represent my own heritage to the other.

In addition, I came to realize far more fully how - despite our often profound differences - we share such fundamentally important values. Our convictions about the transcendent meaning and value of life; seeking to live in the awareness of the Divine Presence in the world and within us; in particular, promoting human dignity freedom and wellbeing. And if we really care about these values, and seek to promote justice, righteousness and peace; then surely we have a sacred obligation to work together for these ideals - to be greater than the sum of our different parts. Not to do so, would in fact be a betrayal of those values we claim adherence to.

However something else struck me like a thunderbolt. It had never occurred to me before to consider the value and meaning of other religious traditions. Suddenly I was aware of the paradox of how so many religious people down the course of history and today, have tried to encapsulate the Divine, God, exclusively within their own traditions. But I realized then that this was ridiculous. If we affirm that God is the Omnipresent Creator of All and, as it says in Psalm 145, "His mercies extend to all his creatures" and He relates to all in our diversity; then there must be diverse ways of relating to God. Moreover how can one Tradition encapsulate the totality of the Divine? Any religious faith can only be a limited understanding of God who is more than any of us can ever comprehend.

And while we meet God in different ways; we affirm that the human person is created in the Divine Image, that there is a Divine dimension to our very existence. Thus, as modern Jewish philosophers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas have emphasised, when we really encounter the other in the sense of his and her full humanity, we encounter the Divine presence itself; we encounter God. This is especially so, when one meets the other who is living in the sense of the Divine Presence in his or her life and tradition.

Thus I realized that interfaith encounters not only strengthened me in my own faith, but also enabled me to get a greater glimpse of the Divine Presence through my encounter with people of different traditions and perspectives, much of which was not mine and sometimes even at variance with my own theological tradition.

There was a great theologian who was both the bishop of Stockholm and previously the Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, Bishop Krister Stendhal. He had three rules for interfaith dialogue, and the first two relate to the comments I have already made:-

Firstly, seek to understand the other, the way she or he understands herself or himself (and not as other might portray them.)

Secondly, view the other communities by the best within them (and don't judge them by the worst within them.)

But his third rule is perhaps the most special of all. He said "leave room for '*holy envy*'"! It is great when we discover that we have much in common – 'you do that? we do something

similar'! - it strengthens a sense of connectedness. However there is nothing wrong with seeing something special and unique in another tradition and being able to admire it – on the contrary! That is what Stendhal meant by “holy envy”.

Meeting people of faith and deep religious commitment from other traditions is an enormously enriching experience in my life – discovering both commonalities and also differences, including aspects that are very special and even unique to different traditions; reflecting not only our wonderful human diversity, but also the diverse ways in which the Divine is experienced, revered and inspires the lives of so many.

And it has been wonderful to see how interfaith encounters can enable people to overcome their prejudices and acquire a broader perception of the Divine Presence in our world.

I mentioned before of how I came to be involved in interfaith relations out of a commitment to social justice in South Africa. However starting that Interfaith Forum wasn't so simple, especially as I felt that it was really important to include representation from the Dutch Reform Church which was the church of almost all Afrikaners who overwhelmingly supported the ruling Nationalist Party. However, I heard of a Dutch Reform minister - a Doeminee in Dutch and Afrikaans - who was holding dialogues with Catholics. Now this might not sound something remarkable to you; but then in the demonology of the Dutch Reform Church in South Africa, there were two great threats – one was the *swart gevaar*, the black threat; and the other was the *romeinse gevaar*, the Catholic threat. I thought, if this guy is meeting with Catholics, then perhaps he'll meet with Jews as well. So I made an appointment to see him.

My opening gambit had worked so well so far. I would say “you know Father, Reverend, Sheikh – the things that should bring us together are so much more important than that which keeps us apart”.

And so far, everyone I had spoken to had agreed with that statement and had joined this initiative. However when I said the same thing to the Doeminee, he replied “To tell you the truth rabbi – the most important thing in my life keeps us apart - my belief in Jesus as my personal Redeemer. And I believe that whoever does not share that, is condemned to hell. Therefore rabbi I have to tell you the truth - it my Christian duty to try to save you and convert you to my Faith.”

Fortunately I was not at a loss for words, but I don't think I even appreciated at the time the value of my reply. I said to him “Thank you Doeminee for your honesty. I would still like you to come to our meetings, as I think it is important that we all understand one another and get to know one another better. And after all I am giving you the opportunity to do what you think is your duty, to tell me about your Faith!”

And he came to our meetings and seemed to become more open in his outlook and brought others along. It was a salutary experience for me, as I realised not only how important it was that I did not take offense at what he had said to me ; but also how the human encounter can indeed change our perceptions of others and even expand our understanding of our own theology.

I saw this often when I was Chief Rabbi of Ireland. Then “the troubles” in Northern Ireland as they called them, were at their height, and this often led to demonization on both sides in

which religious differences were exploited . I was privileged to found, together with the Catholic and Protestant primates of Ireland, the Irish Council of Christian and Jews. And in the work that we were able to do , it was so apparent that when you could get people to see one another - each as created in the Divine Image; each as a child of God; it was possible to enable their faith to be a bridge rather than a barrier. Things improved a lot after I left, just as things improved enormously in South Africa after I left. In fact, as conflicts seem to be resolved to a large degree after I leave! As a result many people are hoping that I will soon leave Jerusalem, in the hope that that will improve the situation in the Holy Land !

But seriously, in all these places and in other places of conflict in the world, we have seen how religion has been misused and abused. To a very large degree this is the result of the inextricable relationship between religion and identity.

Because religion seeks to give us understanding of who we are in the world and how to live accordingly; it is bound up with the various components of our identities; as an individual; as a member of a family, a community, a nation, and so on.

When identities feel threatened such as in a conflict situation, we draw on all that sustains our identity for our defence and especially on the religious heritage that nurtures that identity. So often in situations that are basically territorial conflicts such as in Ireland, and similarly in places today like Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, the Middle East, religion is used not only to provide strength and self-justification ; but often is abused to generate self-righteousness and even to delegitimize the other .

When one sees that terrible things are often done in the name of religion and identity, there is sometimes a very understandable desire to reject these. This is what John Lennon was advocating in his song “Imagine”. “Imagine no more countries, it isn’t hard to do; nothing to live or die for and no religions too.”

But it’s a fallacy. Identity is about who we are. Without identities we are rudderless and all too often most vulnerable to the most destructive influences.

The challenge is to ensure that identities, and above all religious heritages are vehicles to embrace others and not to reject them. Indeed the challenge of life is how to use everything in our world and everything that we are, for a blessing and not for a curse.

Religion has often been used, and is still often used today as a destructive force.

However where people live in accordance with the most noble and beautiful values of their heritage, we see not only how religion can be such a powerful constructive inspiration, but also how interfaith cooperation can be such a blessing and gift – especially in places of conflict and tension.

Regrettably, the negative images of religion tend to be those that hit the headlines; and the positive aspects and images of religion and interfaith cooperation get little or no attention in the media . Yet today there is more interfaith cooperation than ever before in human history. Whether it be the promotion of mutual understanding and respect; or joint action for common causes; interreligious collaboration, nationally and internationally, is growing exponentially in leaps and bounds.

Notable examples in Italy in this regard, are the work of the community of Sant Egidio and the work of the Focolare movement.

Internationally there are organizations like the World Conference of Religions for Peace which has a chapter in Italy and chapters around the world; and other organizations like the United Religions Initiative and the Parliament for the World's Religions. The United Nations has also entered this arena with its Dialogue of Civilizations; and most recently an international interreligious centre was established in Vienna by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia together with the governments of Austria and Spain.

In Israel where I live, my organization the American Jewish Committee founded - together with others - an umbrella organization for all the interfaith work that goes on in the country, called the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. It embraces some sixty organisations promoting or supporting interfaith harmony; and there are additional associations in the country advancing such grass roots activity.

AJC also helped establish a Council of the Heads of the Religious Communities in Israel and even a Holy Land Council of the religious authorities which brings together the official Palestinian and Israeli religious leadership – Christian, Jewish and Muslim. All these organizations, whether grass roots or leadership bodies, serve to facilitate the power of the human encounter, especially in a context of conflict. Even if they themselves cannot bring about a resolution of the conflict, they serve both as a testimony of what is possible and as resources for the day when conflict will be resolved.

Genuine interfaith engagement increases our sense of the Divine Presence in the other. It helps us overcome barriers and fears and enables us to see our differences not as something to denigrate, but rather as something to celebrate.