



# Editors' Page

## Anything you want to ask

ALAN RACE

Our city's "Family of Abraham" group thought it was time to try something different from the usual format for the meetings. Instead of inviting a guest speaker to stimulate our thoughts and reactions on an interesting subject, followed by a period of group work with a Question and Answer session, we wanted a more people-to-people approach. How to involve more than the cognoscenti in our deliberations? It is a challenge faced by many goodwill dialogue groups, now that the signs are that there is a growing public appetite for more informed intelligence about religion and dialogue.

We hit upon what turned out to be a winning formula. If the people would not come to us we would go to the people – a mountain to Muhammad, as it were. So the decision was taken to have a kind of travelling roadshow: we would take a panel of Jews and Christians to mosque, Jews and Muslims to church, and Muslims and Christians to synagogue. The object would not be for the value of experiencing the worship rituals of the host community, but in order for the guests to be quizzed about whatever the host community wanted to ask. It

would be a unique experiment in the "host-guest" dynamic. We called it simply "Who are they? All you wanted to ask about the other two communities". We had a greater turn out of numbers for these events than for anything else we had staged in the past.

There were no set speeches, and therefore no posturings. The panel members were non-professional laity – no rabbis, priests or imams. They answered from the heart and with a sense of personal conviction informed by practice. Liberation from the need to "represent" some official line on a theme opened up fascinating discussions, as well as fascinating dissonances between the "taught" wisdom of tradition and the "experiential" wisdom of individuals. Interrogation ranged over family customs, attitudes to meaning in life, ritual practices, belief systems, scriptural interpretations, morality and the raising of children, world politics, reactions to secularism, and so on. Nothing was out of bounds, with the consequence that nothing was screened out for the sake of politeness. There were only two rules: Respect for the other and the Chair's discretion in handling the discussion.

What did we learn? For me, two main points. First, I observed that the central thrust of the questions asked by the three communities were different. It seemed that Jews were mainly interested in the family, holding the community together, raising children and passing on religious values. What were the Christian and Muslim attitudes to these matters? Christians homed in on the beliefs of the other two worldviews. Why do Jews think this and how do Muslims understand that. Muslims were mostly preoccupied with needing strong/certain answers to life's ambiguities. Why did Christians "weaken" their faith in the face of modernity? Why was "the West" so protective of Israel and not equally the Palestinians? My observation slightly stereotypes wide-ranging discussions but it is also not without some foundation. I learned that we each look out at the other through the lens not only of our own answers but also of our own questions and interests, and we assume that that is what it is to be religious. Open dialogue clearly teaches us differently.

Second, the ability to render oneself vulnerable on the territory of the other created a different atmosphere, possibly because the dialogue seemed to be adopting a different seriousness about the relationships of power between and social location of our relationships. Risking one's spiritual safety by moving into the religious house of the other sends a signal and does away with all pretensions to power and control over the issues and

the discussion. We speak and act differently when at home and when away. Entering the sacred space of the other with nothing but the intention of learning from them brings down barriers. It has been said a thousand times before, but it bears repetition: there really is no substitute for face-to-face meeting if we want to promote lasting dialogue and engagement in interreligious work.

What our "Family of Abraham" group does next remains to be seen. Since then the war in Gaza has intervened. I would like to think that our experiment in "dialogue for the people" at least provided all of us with images of the other that help us not to fall into polarities of vision and stereotypes of misunderstanding.

Alan Race

## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

With this issue, we bid a fond and very reluctant farewell to Tracy Olmsted, *Insight's* Art Director. Tracy was with us from the beginning in 2003 and played a major role in making the journal what it is today. We are extremely grateful and we will miss her very much.

At the same time, we are delighted to welcome our new Art Director, Ron Kauffman. We look forward to a long and creative partnership.