

## **Interreligious Insight October, 2003 Edition**

### **The Editor's Page**

#### **No Choice Between Common Ground & Differences**

The question facing all religious communities in any modern multifaith city is how they can turn themselves into communities marked less by rivalry and more by respect. We all know that religious voices can sometimes sound depressingly judgemental. Now is the time when the shared nobler value of compassion should be given greater priority. However, the exploration of how faith communities can build relationships of trust across the deep divides of belief and cultural identity will not be easy for most believers. The unthinking view that all religions more or less preach the same message is a mistake. Talk to committed believers from any two religions and you will soon discover their differences. But why should differences engender mistrust?

The interreligious movement has spent many years and many conferences working at issues of common ground. This has yielded much fruit. It has helped to create a web of relationships that forms the context for the next stage in our shared search for religious understanding. Of course some hard-nosed postmodernists will not admit of any common ground; for them, there are simply unbridgeable differences between traditions. But those who have worked across boundaries know that there are numerous approaches to common ground: analogous symbols stretching across religious languages, intuitive insights stumbling on family-resemblances across religious systems, a shared pool of mystical wisdom, the necessity of practical action for justice, peace and sustainability.

However, it is fair to say now that the fascination with common ground is giving way to the celebration of differences. This turn, it is said, will properly ensure that we do not co-opt 'the other' into our own framework and thereby obliterate its distinctiveness. Besides, why should the concentration on unity necessarily bring the trust that we yearn for? Diversity is what makes us interesting.

Diversity or unity – these are two sides of the same challenge to develop positive interreligious relationships for the sake of the future. Looking to unity or celebrating diversity are both ways for overcoming suspicion between communities. Yet the problem remains that suspicion can so often be exploited in support of hatred and sometimes violence. Therefore - whether carving out unity or celebrating diversity - the religions have to face honestly the roots of their historic antagonisms.

Given that religions do have an in-built tendency to think of themselves as superior to their rivals, it seems that the religions have now to dismantle their self-styled superiorities and exclusivities. Only then will we be able to listen to one another, build up genuine respect and forge working relationships that have lasting hope. There may not be a logical link between claiming exclusive truth for one's own community and generating suspicion of "the other" but there have been no shortage of believers who have acted as though the former definitely implied the latter.

Interreligious conversation teaches us that truthful religious vision is not the sole possession of any one community. Through trustful encounter we recover the traditional truth - which all our rival communities share - that religious vision can never be fully grasped by human beings enmeshed in their historic limitations. We are freed to cherish our religious differences as part of a bigger picture of what religion really celebrates. Ultimate reality remains a mystery; human beings have their partial perspectives on it. If we do not learn to value our differences how else will faith communities answer accusations that they are part of the problem in modern cities and not part of the solution?

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