



# Editors' Page

## Real Thing or Distraction?

Ever since 9/11 the interfaith world has been on the back foot. We have been pushed onto the defensive, having to justify to a startled world why religion is really a force for constructive good and not for destructive bad. In the face of an attack which was perpetrated in the name of the Most High, religion has rightly had to explain both to its cultured critics and its popular despisers why it is not the source of all the world's ills. No matter what the creed or denomination, we now know what religions are capable of: transforming goodness or disfiguring evil. Of course, anyone with even a slight knowledge of history will know that this has always been the case. The context of the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, is one where the expectations of interreligious dialogue and cooperation is more positive than in times past and consequently bears a burden for settling religion's ambiguous legacy once and for all.

It might seem churlish of me therefore to question whether 9/11 really marks the turning-point in interfaith history which some have called it. Certainly 9/11 (and other terrorist bombings) represents a traumatic scar

for humanity and probably a lifetime's grieving for families who suffered loss. We should not underplay such loss. Nevertheless, should 9/11 be allowed to frame the sole purpose of interfaith endeavour? I believe that there are signs that the interfaith focus is beginning to shift. As this happens, we may begin to wonder if 9/11 was actually a distraction from the real purpose of interfaith work and not its defining moment.

But we should not exhale a sigh of relief too soon. 9/11 led to a huge outpouring of interfaith sharing at local and global, and popular and scholarly levels. The wake-up call to avert any clash of civilizations is being heeded; the virtue of respect for those who are different is being taken to heart; the rush to find out about religions has significantly increased; joining together for common projects has begun to blossom; interfaith education is being installed in the Academy and among communities; and contact between the faiths has increased exponentially. While some of these activities may have been in place for a number of years, it has taken a terrorist spectacle to catapult them into mainstream consciousness.

The sense in which 9/11 has made us all aware of the ambiguities of religious attraction and power in the hands of determined people cannot be gainsaid. Religion is a dangerous affair. In the face of the wild beast, interfaith activity may be the only antidote to the abuse of religious power and be the only endeavour which stands a chance of curbing dangers which arise from adherence to absolutist demands. Put like that it does seem unnecessarily perverse to enquire into any other motivations for interfaith outreach.

Yet I still want to suggest – no more than this – that rendering 9/11 and its aftermath as the sole frame for interfaith work is to limit what is at the heart of interfaith interaction. At its heart is the struggle to view and feel the world as others view and feel it, so as to learn, change and expand in consciousness accordingly. And for any expansion of consciousness to take place I do not see how it is possible without the surrender of that sense of absolutism which may even be the source of religion's very energy itself. Without wrestling with this paradox, all of the noble and celebratory praxis within the interfaith movement for understanding and cooperation will simply be either a form of reaction to events or a secretive means for holding on to the final triumph of one's own alleged superior angle on what is after all the hiddenness of ultimate mystery.

There are other reasons for questioning whether religious absolutism has

a future. Current debate about climate change becomes revelatory about fundamental notions of transitoriness within existence, whether or not survival is a religious good, and so on. How is it possible for one religion to have anything more than a fragment of wisdom to offer in the face of these questions? Or, in a globalizing world, where differences and samenesses between traditions remain stubborn realities, how is it possible for any one tradition to think that their version of the meaning of human community can be the only or best version? If it is the case that we need one another as never before, how can one tradition's view of human community allow for the radical differences of the other to have their place in the sun without needing to subsume them under one's won sacred canopy? Imagining the future and what we might become is part of a definition of who we are. So how can religious absolutism sustain a future which has no option but to be shared?

Religions do have an under belly and history has witnessed it. But dealing with the under belly is but one facet of the need to expand our consciousness for the sake of a future worthy of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

Alan Race