

I have been strangely surprised to learn how long I have been involved with interfaith conversations – in which I have made friends during my tenure on the executive committee of the Interfaith Network. So what has been my experience so far in participating in interfaith activities? Two things remain very important to me as I participate in interfaith activities; the first is that the conviction to my faith remains an absolute and therefore non-negotiable; secondly, my engagement with interfaith is solely on matters of community cohesion because it is only the community that is common between myself and my Bahian or Muslim colleagues.

1 Of course the question then is how have I engaged in interfaith affairs as Baptist evangelical charismatic who speaks in tongues which some Baptists find difficult to accept let alone the belief that God is good and is in the business of doing miracles even in the now? Engaging in Interfaith relations to me has been like having a conversation with a postmodernist – as a Christian I do not come to these conversation with the anticipation that if I engage with this other person then God is obligated to do such-and-so. I only allow my motives in these conversations to emerge from the desire to give room to the mystery of my faith. This mystery of my faith allows me to accept the fact that in whatever situation I find myself I cannot defend nor am I there to protect God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. I have since come to find out that God is not whimsical and untamed – at least the God I believe in is.

So, in my interfaith conversations whether on national level or our local interfaith I find myself invited to a place where I can trust a God who is beyond my comprehension – and this God is capable of taking care of himself. I am inclined to the fact that interfaith engagement is the most effective way to reveal the Christian hidden God. I want to argue that interfaith relations, wherever they are carried out, critiques the arrogance of Christian doctrine, and in so doing, offers the church one of its greatest opportunities to present the gospel. It is the opportunity to demonstrate the presence of the Christian God here and now. Paul was not afraid to engage (Acts 17), but my desire is not apologetics in these interfaith conversations, but rather the quiet demonstration of God's presence and power to create change.

Interfaith conversations are *downturns*, that is to say, an overturning of the way we see and relate, a radical disruption of the way we think. Correct Christian doctrine with which to engage in interfaith conversations is essential, but correct doctrine [thinking] begins not with the assurance that I am right, but with the humility that I am wrong, or better still perhaps, there are many things in life and faith that remain a mystery to me. Jesus said we shall know the truth, and the truth that we know shall set us free. It sets us free to reach out to others with love and compassion rather than attempting to prove that we are right. I have discovered that it is possible to listen with critical ears but also with ears to hear if there is something redemptive or that needs to challenge me in areas in which I have become complacent and comfortable. Our personal stories matter to God, and therefore your individual importance is central to our faith it is this that we engage with in interfaith conversations.

2 Secondly, my engagement with interfaith has been predominantly in the area of community cohesion. Like I said above the well being of a community is one of the key areas that brings different faiths together. The former British Council of Churches summarized the WCC guidelines in four principles: Dialogue begins when people meet each other; Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust; Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community; Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.

I belong to the local interfaith network – Hillingdon Inter Faith Network in West London. Like all other local network while we meet to consider issues of concern to the local community every now and then we are confronted with matters of dispute between faith groups [from growing fragmentation] and other times request for support. Faith groups that once spurned inter faith dialogue now see the value of participation, making localism the place for many groups to express themselves. This freedom of expression in the local inter faith discussions and social actions raise two areas of concern for potential participants:

a) Possible motivations and agendas of other participants

It is not always the case that we are confronted with worries about the possible motivations and agendas of other participants. But, at some point we have faced the question of groups not currently nationally recognized to stand independently [Ahmadiya in our case] move to be accommodated at a local level. This kind of moves are off putting and have created tension as groups have been seen to want to

foster their own agenda [perceived to be proselytizing], therefore disrespecting the interfaith wisdom of dialogue. When groups are self-defining and regard themselves as belonging to a particular world religion but are not recognised as such internally within that faith, the local inter faith becomes the place for seeking redressing of issues. This state of affair leaves the local interfaith in an awkward position, as they have no national interfaith wisdom to draw from in addressing questions regarding groups that may not have been internally recognized by their perceived overarching religion or faith. In Hillingdon, the Inter Faith executive has been responsible in addressing issues of possible motivations and agendas of other participants by inviting leaders of the group in question to a conversation. From our experience so far, if faith communities are to contribute to community cohesion, then contexts in which they talk to one another are potentially valuable discursive spaces that can have an important part to play in a pluralistic public sphere. But such context cannot be allowed to flow into possible motivations and agenda of other participants.

b) The fear that there will be a need to compromise deeply held beliefs

At the local level, the religious dimension of community cohesion has been seen as important, giving key focus to the place of inter-religious dialogue and encounter in contributing to good community relations. The fear of compromising deeply held beliefs therefore become very obvious, making any potential participants recoil on being involved. To remove such fear, one way that Hillingdon Inter Faith has acted is by spreading community activities across the faith groups involved. For example, during the introduction to the local community of the new police corporals the event was carried at a local mosque with all other faith groups invited, and each group present was given space to talk about activities and events in their own faith community. During interfaith week although the event was held at the civic centre a specific faith group from the Hindu religion was given the opportunity to serve refreshment while other groups were given an opportunity to address a specific local issues from the their faith perspective. The most recent event is the Hillingdon Dementia Awareness, a programme offered by the local authority to local groups, this time the event was held at a Christian church, at which all the faith groups in Hillingdon were welcomed and given opportunity to notify participants of any events of interest in their own faith group gatherings. Hillingdon Inter Faith also provides a single space for all faith groups when it comes to events like the local Uxbridge carnival or the Hayes carnival celebrations. All faith groups are given space at the interfaith stand to display their activities and literature, suggesting a sense of fairness.

The simple ethical requirement underpinning this spread out interfaith events at different local faith centre is to respect others, particularly those who tend feel or are actually marginalised.

Concluding remarks:

In order to be able to encourage people to participate in faith discussions and multi faith social actions the two issues raised must be eliminated first. To eliminate a sense of possible motivations and agendas of other participants as well as addressing the fear that there will be need to compromise deeply held beliefs; faith groups will be the better off entering into bi-lateral or multi-lateral dialogue.

From our experience in Hillingdon Inter Faith, bi-lateral dialogue is concerned with building good relationships and more particularly exploring areas of common ground. In such dialogue, participants often speak of their spiritual transformation in sharing their faith with someone of a different faith. On-going bi-lateral dialogue consequently assumes recognition of a degree of ‘value’, even ‘truth’ in ‘the other’. And a part from that the only value in bi-lateral dialogue would be to correct error and presumably ‘convert’. Importantly to note is the fact that, bi-lateral dialogues tend to take place in a different ‘space’ to the multi-lateral dialogues that are in the ‘public domain’.

This ‘public domain’ is where people of all faiths and none engage with one another. The multi-lateral local inter faith organisation is clearly an aspect of the ‘public square’ where different religions encounter one another. At this point it is not expected of them to recognise each other’s own self-understanding, nor to accept that they necessarily hold beliefs that should be accepted or approved. The multi-lateral inter faith body is merely the space in which different faiths and belief systems engage with one another in the public domain. In our experience in Hillingdon Inter Faith group the bi-lateral conversation takes what were multi-dialogues conversations beyond that public domain into a deeper engagement where the value of the other is recognised.

In light of Pentecostal culture will the Pentecostal churches have the courage to engage in interfaith conversations and listen to others unlike them? It seems to me to understand interfaith we need to listen well to people’s starting points. Belief today is a matter of personal encounter not dogmatic assent. If this is the case does our faith

matter subjectively or is it solely a matter of objective truth? As Pentecostals can we hear and speak of faith in ways that shape our story and show that God is intimately involved in all we do? Notwithstanding all else, our faith informs our interpretation and our willingness to dialogue with a multicultural, relativist age.

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