

## Interreligious Dialogue: What's There to Talk About?

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UCV

So a lot of you know that I grew up in a parochial religious and cultural enclave in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps, not *so* parochial: I grew up being taught that “truth would prevail;” grew up believing we were called to seek wisdom out of the best books; that we were convoked to reason together, and enjoined to learn of things both in the heavens and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home and abroad, the wars and perplexities of the nations; and knowledge of countries and kingdoms. (*Doctrine and Covenants*, 50:11; 88:79, 118 )

It was quite a set up, if you took it seriously, as I did as a lad. So when I ventured out of the fastness of the Rocky Mountains as a teenager, I already had begun to learn things both in the heavens and the earth and of countries and kingdoms; so much so that, though a seventeen year old youngster, I considered myself no rube. But of a more intimate knowledge of other religions, I thought I was unschooled, and wanted to know more. More than that; I wanted to know something more of my own faith tradition, my community and history; I wanted to better understand and appreciate it by knowing more about the history and faith of other religions. Surely, there was something crucial here I needed to know.

What I had not foreseen was the experience from Providence, Rhode Island to Jersulaem, of listening to people of other faiths honestly, thoughtfully grappling with some of the darkest, most difficult matters in their histories, their theologies and practice, as well as their strengths, in frank dialogue face-to-face with representatives of other religions. This was a rare, sometimes terrifying, and enlightening privilege—one I will never forget, and that I treasure to this day.

In particular, I became intimately involved in frank exchanges between Jewish and Christian scholars grappling with the fratricidal history of these two faith traditions. Starting with the fact that in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the heart of Christian Europe, Jews were singled out for opprobrium and extermination with few words or deeds of protest from Christendom, we then looked at our histories, theologies and scriptures to ferret out a dismal two millennia long genealogy of contempt and conceptual negation—especially from the Christian side of the ledger. From these, we worked to determine what had been tragically binding—I should say blinding—for our faith traditions; but also, in all painful honesty, what should, what must be repudiated in the very heart of these texts and traditions *now* for the sake of the validity of our respective religions if we were to have anything like a mutually respectful, honest, critical and generative present and future.

Let me put it this way: imagine sitting across the table from an indigenous elder, a Muslim, Hindu, Jew, or trinitarian Christian, or others. On the table before us, are selective passages from the writings of Unitarian greats like Michael Servetus, Joseph Priestley, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, James Freeman Clark and others, where, in one passage after another they heaped scorn on the teachings and practices of the religions held dear by the people sitting across the table from you. And, in turn, those from the other side of the table lay down passages from their own great theologians and traditions holding us Unitarians up in contempt for all kinds of theological and historical errors and mess ups. *It wouldn't be difficult at all!* There are plenty of texts of this nature on both sides of the table. Question is: when has this ever truly taken place? And how would they and we engage with these texts and respond, and to what purpose—any good at all?

Welcome to the world of interreligious dialogue! It needn't be and isn't always so provocative. People engaged in interreligious dialogue rarely begin by laying down mutually trash talking cards of our faith traditions on the table. Instead, things start out with confidence building gestures, steps and pronouncements. Still, there is a provocative edge to genuine face-to-face dialogue when people of faith, and in good faith, sit down to speak, reason and explore together.

Think about it: religions, including ours, begin not dialogically, but monologically. They begin in protest, negation, cultural clear cutting and sectarian affirmation of particular truths. The Buddha attained nirvana and discovered the Middle Way after following and then rejecting worldviews that enjoined lifestyles of self-indulgence, self-mortification, and radical withdrawal from society. Mohammed's revelation of the Quran was inspired by his reaction against polytheism, gross injustice, and fratricidal violence in 7<sup>th</sup> Century Arabia. Our Unitarian founders brilliantly criticized what they experienced as dogmatic, irrational and repressive theologies and institutions of Western Christendom. We could go down the list of nearly all world religions and find this script and dynamic at play.

In each case, the rejection of the status quo by an upstart was accompanied by an alternative religious and cultural vision sufficiently compelling to create a new faith tradition and community. So far so good, we may think, but there's a catch: founders of religions (and anti-religions) and their true believers tend to discover and embrace one truth, way, and path: and under banners of cross, crescent, eight-spoked wheel, Shinto gate, Confucian ideogram, Star of David, Sanskrit *pranava*, and red flags—you name it—religions and their militant siblings have gone forth first by negating their predecessors, their rivals, and then on and beyond to establish themselves extensively across landscapes and peoples through domination, conversion,

regulation and compulsion. The exceptions, few and far between, seem to me to prove the rule: religious and secular worldviews have been primarily about monologues, not dialogue; uniformity, not pluralism.

It was always thus, and still is all-too-frequently so, until very recently, here and there, when something new under the sun arose, and it's happened during the lifetimes of many of us here. It started in the decades after World War II with the shocks of the Holocaust, the demise of Western European Empires, and the rise of a post-colonial world, its peoples and cultures. Add to these events indigenous voices and traditions, a global environmental crisis, the women's movement, secularism—the list goes on. Cumulatively, for many people, it all meant that the assumption of Western religious and cultural monological superiority was finished. The time came to face the strong claims to attention and respect of other cultures, marginalized peoples, traditions and religions. The time came to radically rethink one's own heritage. The best place to start was *energetic, active engagement* with this diversity based on *dialogue*. And dialogue is predicated upon the ability to struggle to hear the “Other” and to respond, critically and self-critically; and then to stay dedicated to the give-and-take, speaking and listening—a process that reveals both common understandings and real differences with real people, with real commitments and integrity.

Inspired by my experience and study, and deeply moved and excited by our own pluralistic religious vision, with your encouragement, and support, I was primed when I arrived here almost fifteen years ago to find like-minded colleagues and communities dedicated to a religiously dialogical vision and practice.

And so I dove into one well-intentioned organization, event and initiative after another with sincere idealism and hope: the Pacific Interfaith Council, the Worldviews Collaborative, the

InterSpiritual Centre of Vancouver, the Multi-faith Action Society, the Mayor's Interfaith Alliance to End Homelessness, the Faith Leaders Breakfast Forums, among others. I've spent hundreds of hours of precious time attending meetings, worship services and awards banquets, organizing events, devising terms of reference, reviewing budgets, drafting curricula for secondary schools, contributing to faith leaders' statements on homelessness, hosting the Mayor's Interfaith Alliance here, speaking at university classes and preaching at Interfaith Services for Commonwealth Day. I have been at City Hall, Christ Church cathedral, the Vancouver School of Theology, Simon Fraser University, and various churches, synagogues and mosques. And what do I have to show for it? What can I point to you and me as concrete, honest-to-god, life saving, city changing, religiously transformative accomplishments in all this? Nothing. Or perhaps I'm blind to it. It does feel like I have failed.

Let me give you a couple of examples: I remember a large gathering of faith leaders at Kerrisdale United Church; a very impressive multi-faith assembly. Then Mayor Larry Campbell and someone from the Vancouver Olympic Committee and the Provincial Government were guest speakers. The point of the whole affair, after some to and fro with the audience, was to get us to fall in line and support the Olympics. That really was it. We were assured the Olympics would generate good jobs, tons of social housing (!), that it would celebrate the indigenous peoples of the Province, and that our contribution was needed to provide interfaith chaplaincy services for the tens of thousands of athletes and spectators. It was a farce—I'd seen it all played out before—exactly the same script in Salt Lake City leading up to its Winter Olympics in 2002.

People!, faith leaders were just on some International Olympic Committee check list that the local committee and governments were required to tick off. And after being thrown the sop

of all the social housing that would be created to soothe our social justice conscience, we were being asked to function as tools: to fall in line and bring our communities with us. (I refused.)

Second story: Rabbi Chuck Feinberg and Rev. Harry Oussouren were the main organizers of the Faith Leaders breakfast forum. They were truly committed to getting clergy together from across the religious spectrum in order to break the ice and get us talking about substantive issues. In the same year, they both left Vancouver, and the forum fell apart. I thought this was a tragedy. And so, from this church office, I created a contact list of scores and scores of clergy across Vancouver and beyond. I sent out letters of invitation calling on colleagues to meet and reanimate our faith leaders group—stating this was a precious resource for interfaith meetings and a place for potential, real interreligious dialogue among us. I rustled up some money and UCV member volunteers, and on the appointed morning we had a fine breakfast prepared for our guests. I set up chairs in the Fireside Room, and printed up an agenda and readings to get things going again. It was even a beautiful sunny morning. Two Scientologists and a young United Church minister showed up. (That was it.)

One more story. A small group of clergy had gathered for a discussion about one of the most formative and troubling narratives in the Bible, a story that also appears in the Quran: it's about Abraham being called by god to sacrifice his son: Isaac in the Bible, Ishmael in the Quran. My colleagues were learned in the texts, commentaries and traditions; sincere, respectful and engaged. I listened attentively and was pretty stoked.

Finally at one point, I offered my own thoughts—things Diana and I had talked about—saying, I believed that Abraham had failed the test given to him: he should have bluntly refused the divine command to sacrifice his son and refused to worship a god that would make that kind of heartless demand of a loving father. Maybe that's what God really wanted to hear from

Abraham all along—his refusal to obey an inhuman demand. An awkward silence ensued, and I got the distinct impression that my colleagues thought an alien had just dropped down from another planet.

Variations on these stories have played out for me over and over again. I have been more than once bitten and thus twice shy. Fact is, I've been masticated to a pulp—and left feeling fairly pessimistic about interfaith and dialogical efforts in this city. So you can, perhaps, see why I turned down an invitation to mount the stage at the Chan Centre in company with an array of faith leaders whose sole function was to provide a colourful, but mute, backdrop for a speech on world peace by the Dalai Lama. It would have been a waste of my time and yours. Nice theatre, but what would be the take away, truly, from such a grand event? Dialogue? No.

I'm fed up being a complicit tool for civic boosters; tired of meeting with government officials who have no intention of following through on social justice recommendations from multi-faith leaders; I'm going to skip public events mouthing platitudes about religious tolerance and awards banquets honouring people who've done nothing to promote interfaith engagement and dialogue. In sum, I'm learning through hard experience to be more judicious and effective in how I use my time and resources.

I've wondered why things are different here, because there are places where substantial, effective interfaith work and interreligious dialogue have and are taking place; where faith leaders, laity, civil society and government officials gather in meaningful, honest engagement over real differences, challenges and shared resources and hopes. Maybe it's due to our much hyped multiculturalism, or our narratives of solitudes, survival, and mosaics. Maybe it has to do with our “spiritual not religious” zeitgeist, the ferocious economic squeeze on our millennial generation, the residential school disaster, and our obsession with real estate and development. I

think, as well, of the fateful decision in this Province of having created a dual school system, public and private, each supported by our taxes, where our children hive of into secular and religious enclaves—each learning precious little of the Other, and thus schooled in relative ignorance and disengagement from the Other.

Scarce time and resources to meet staffing, mortgages, pastoral and programming needs bedevil clergy and lay leaders alike. They, we, struggle just to keep things going, making it difficult to dedicate time and energy to engage with issues and people beyond the pressing, real needs of our individual religious communities. Finally, maybe there are clergy like me—disappointed with time and efforts wasted; and yet, who'd still give their eye teeth for something like real interreligious dialogue to take place. ...

For the sake of effective citizenship in a pluralistic world and to better live our own faith, we still have a lot to learn even about the basics of other religions—and I thank Stanley Tromp for facilitating a world religions Adult Ed. class that meets in Hitschmanova on Tuesday evenings at 7pm. Thanks as well to Morgan Reid and his proposal to produce a new curriculum for our kids on “Sharing Knowledge...Respect and dialogue between members of world religious communities in the Lower Mainland.” As well, the Canadian Unitarian Council is developing “Truth, Healing and Reconciliation Reflection Guides” to help further our interfaith work as allies to act on the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And I'm pleased that UCV Funds have been dedicated to help achieve these two projects; and grateful, too, for those UCV members who participated in Truth, Healing and Reconciliation workshops that took place here in January and February.

A moment ago, I said I'd still give my eye teeth for something like real interreligious dialogue to take place; and I've not given up. There are crucial issues facing us close to home

and beyond which cry out for it. Because alone, my vision, our vision, is too narrow to see all that must be seen, our strength too limited to do all that must be done: What's our obligation to the stranger, the Other in our midst? What do our religious traditions say about the creation and rising into being of our world and our subsequent duties to it as responsible stewards? What are children; what do our religions say about them? How have we failed them; how do we endow them to be culturally competent, emotionally resilient and spiritually strong? How do our religions equip us to respond critically, responsibly to the omnivorous pressures of consumerist culture? How do we honour and learn from both the prophetic and the mystical strains in our religious traditions? How do we define progress; what are we to say to our millennial generation about diminishing expectations and crushing debt burdens from a religious/ethical point of view?

There is still a great deal to talk about and to learn; interreligious dialogue has barely begun, and it's truly needed. In May, I'm going to be attending two events in Vancouver where I'll be bringing my dialogical self, because it still matters, more than ever; and these two events may be the real thing. What counts for me is that I'll be going assuming the best in others, and with respect. I know that they and we have deep flaws, chequered histories and blind spots. These, I hope, will be frankly acknowledged. But I know as well that they and we have unique strengths, experience and insights to share—and in so doing, I hope that a transformational experience can take place.

What's wild, what I deeply appreciate, is that we, here, share a tradition that has laid the foundations for a dialogical way of being and becoming: it's embodied in the religiously plural hymnbook from which we sing and read; it's embodied in the magnificent, capacious array of Sources from which we draw insight and wisdom. These keep our faith alive and call us to be open and engaged with the world, for the sake of the world, the earth, ourselves, our children, and for generations to come. May we cherish and appreciate this gift and take it with us out into the world.