

# WHY INTERFAITH DIALOGUE?

An attempt to offer a rationale for participation in interfaith dialogue.

By Garth Read

## **Introduction**

This rationale recognizes the fact that there are and always have been many different ‘religions’ on this planet. Diversity is a given when considering the nature and role of religion in human society. A positive and constructive acceptance of this fact is therefore the dominant first principle guiding any attempt to engage in interfaith dialogue.

The understanding of interfaith dialogue put forward in this paper does not represent the perspective of any one religion. Members of each religion need to make their own responses to religious pluralism. They also need to assess the extent to which they can participate in interfaith dialogue in ways that do not compromise some fundamental beliefs that are at the heart of their own faith and commitments.

My tentative definition of ‘religion’ points to functional systems of transcendent and transforming visions of the place of humans within the experienced world. The transcendent elements often include ideas of the Divine, supernatural powers and realms, and spiritual experiences, insights and wisdom. The transforming elements include the advocacy of various ways and means to achieve or at least approximate the realization of a human self-understanding that goes beyond the mundane necessities for survival and procreation.

I use the word ‘faith’ to indicate the intellectual, emotional and creative means by which believers respond to the ‘truth claims’ presented by particular religions. The word ‘faith’ also points to that motivating energy that sustains a commitment to the communal and personal visions, ways of life and missions associated with particular religions.

The word, ‘dialogue’ indicates activities that involve somewhat intensive interpersonal relationships with a heavy emphasis on conversation and discussion. Interfaith dialogue, therefore, is an activity in which people of faith engage in serious and respectful conversations about the diversity of religious belief and practice.

Approaching the topic of interfaith dialogue from this starting point reflects an attempt to answer the title question in a way that invites followers and adherents of different religions to engage in dialogue.

## **The Plurality of Religions**

Human beings are social beings. They only come into being, survive and thrive in relation to and with others of their kind. Clearly, this is an interdependent relationship in which the individual depends on the group and the group’s survival and development depends on the

continuing participation of individuals. It is through this relationship between individuals and the collectives to which they belong, that beliefs about the nature, purpose, origins and destiny of human life are constructed and nurtured.

For many millennia the vast number of human groups on this planet tended to live in isolation from one another. Each of these groups, in varying ways, developed their own particular belief systems. Consequently, human belief systems have always been many and diverse. Pluralism has been a fact of life for as long as humans have been self-conscious and imaginative creatures. However, the groups, clans and tribes etc that nurtured these different systems of belief had little if any knowledge of, let alone interaction with people who were different from themselves. The major traditional religious belief systems of the world, including some surviving indigenous traditions, have their roots in these kinds of situations.

One result of this isolation was that an enormous amount of human life-experience, self-understanding and belief was not a part of the milieu in which individuals grew up. A person's particular belief system was self-evidently absolute and the existence of alternative systems was incomprehensible. Clearly these situations have been gradually changing over many years and total isolation from other people holding significantly different religious belief systems is not an option for most people living in the contemporary world. All of the expanding mechanisms of globalisation reinforce our awareness that we have an interdependent relationship with all of the citizens of *The Global Village*. While bringing the whole of humanity closer together this village orientation and mindset also illuminates with intense clarity the realities of cultural and religious diversity. It also highlights the enduring passion with which most people value their inherited belief systems as essential components of their individual and collective identity.

## **Responses to the Plurality of Religions**

Isolation from people of different beliefs may not be a contemporary option for us. We are, however, able to make different responses to religious pluralism. The labels used to identify the following examples of responses are not watertight categories. Different individuals may exhibit some characteristics of each of these types. It should also be recognized that people may not respond in the same way to all of the religions that they may encounter.

### **Ignore**

For a long time most religious people, even those living in contemporary multifaith societies have been able to ignore these different religious belief systems. Any detailed knowledge and sensitive understanding of these religious systems have been seen as irrelevant. The regular and often onerous duties involved in maintaining the worship, educational, welfare and social activities of their own religious community consume a large measure of their available time and resources. There may not be any animosity towards people of other faiths but equally there is no felt need to seek and nurture friendships across these divisions. Some curiosity may arise when this general awareness is supplemented by casual relationships with people of other faiths arising in the natural course of living in the same neighbourhood. However, this curiosity seldom

translates into any formal and sustained attempts to learn about other religions or efforts to establish close and on-going relationships with members of other religious communities.

## **Replace**

A wide range of attitudes maybe found in people who make this kind of response to religions other than their own. The dominate desire, however, is to replace the other religion(s) with their own.

Many people believe that the culture, race, nation or civilization to which they belong is inextricably linked to one particular religious tradition. They may even go so far as to assert that it is the religion, above all else, that is the essential defining characteristic of that culture or civilization. Any notion of a multicultural, let alone a multifaith society, is unthinkable even abhorrent. People of another religious tradition entering the society with intentions of making it their new permanent home, come under great pressure to assimilate, keep a very low profile or to 'go back to where they belong'.

Significant numbers of religious people may respond in this way because of the very strong evangelizing tradition of their faith. An exhortation, if not Divine command, to convert all people to The (their) Faith, lies at the heart of their religion. This is particularly true of followers of theistic religions that have emerged in response to what is believed to be a specific, if not unique experience of God's self-revelation.

## **Harmonise**

Another response to the plurality of religions reflects a belief that in spite of all their differences in cultural orientation and phenomenological manifestations, all religions, at their core, are essentially the same. The followers of each and every religion are believed to be on different paths leading to the one Divine or ultimate reality and destiny. The all too frequent and often hostile disputes and competitions between, and indeed within the religions, are a source of frustration and perhaps anger. People making this kind of response look for the things that all religions have in common and suggest that the differences between them are of secondary importance, if not irrelevant. Evidence of commonality is looked for in the theological, spiritual and ethical dimensions of the religions.

## **Embrace**

The use of the term *embrace* in this context is intended to convey a cluster of positive attitudes that include respect for others, a desire to learn more about others and an intention to draw close to others in friendly and hospitable ways. This kind of response reflects a belief that religious differences are interesting and important. They are seen to be important because they are recognized as the essential defining characteristics of each religious group and of individuals who belong to them. When people describe themselves as Buddhist, Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu etc. they are saying something very important about themselves and they are seeking to make significant differentiations between themselves and other religious people.

## **Interfaith Practitioners**

As previously indicated, dialogue is an activity that involves intensive interpersonal relationships with an emphasis on conversation and discussion. It ought to go without saying, therefore, that a sustained commitment to the general protocols, conventions and manners that guide all civilized interaction between human beings is an essential characteristic of the process of interfaith dialogue. In summary, these include showing to all involved, respect and courtesy; upholding each other's freedom and dignity; and exercising goodwill, sensitivity and honesty in all that we say and do. Alongside these general good manners there are also attitudes of mind that are specific, though not unique to the practice of interfaith dialogue.

### **Sharing hospitality**

Hospitality is a normal and widespread human attitude and activity. For most religious people a requirement to extend hospitality to others is also a central tenet of their Faith. Consequently, people participating in interfaith dialogue bring with them a natural and a religious disposition towards hospitality.

The wide spread fear and distrust of others who are culturally and religiously different arises primarily from a lack of the hospitable exchanges that characterize friendly and neighbourly relationships. Casual passing acquaintances in which people remain anonymous strangers do not foster intercultural understanding and personal trust.

In the context of interfaith dialogue, achieving the desired levels of engagement of mind and spirit is facilitated when different understandings of hospitable behaviour are shared and when participants actively seek opportunities to befriend and entertain as guests, people of other Faiths. These expressions of hospitality may include invitations to a range of different social, educational, festival and worship activities.

### **Rejecting religious superiority**

People who embrace religious plurality as natural and inevitable find it difficult to adopt any explicit or implicit stance of religious superiority over other participants.

People with such an attitude are aware of the close relationship between a religious faith and personal and communal identities. They know how this close relationship works within themselves and the religious community to which they belong. They are, therefore, likely to have an empathetic understanding of how important this is to the others with whom they are in conversation. The sharing of different religious histories can also deepen one's awareness of how attempts to eradicate religious diversity in favour of conformity to one perceived 'religious truth' results in conflict and disaster. Rejecting feelings of superiority can also help people accept the possibility of individuals converting from one religion to another when this is done without coercion or other forms of pressure.

## **Learning from others**

Participants in interfaith dialogue who have overcome any feelings of religious superiority are likely to be open to the possibility that they might learn something from the other members of the dialogue.

Our understanding of what it is to be human is a ‘work in progress’. It changes and evolves. One consequence of this is that humanity does not find its complete and final expression in any one culture or religion. We are all, individually and collectively deficient in material, intellectual, emotional and spiritual capital, skills and resources. Each individual and each society has something to offer to the rest. This is not to suggest that critical evaluation should be excluded from cross-cultural interactions. Nonetheless, it is true that all human societies and therefore individuals within them are shaped and, over time, reshaped by this process of cultural give and take.

People who participate in interfaith dialogue often do so because they believe that they are in a two-way learning situation.

## **Using inclusive and non-presumptive language**

Communication is at the heart of interfaith dialogue. Dialogue depends on the establishment of channels of communication that facilitate the flow of factual and truthful information between all concerned. Its sustainability also depends on participants using language that does not fracture good relationships.

People entering into interfaith dialogue situations need to adopt a conversational style that allows all participants to feel included. This requires a style that maintains a clear distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘belief’ types of statements. A couple of examples may suffice to illustrate this concern.

(a) Care should be taken when making comments such as, “We all believe in the same God, therefore we should all .....’. In some dialogue situations the first assertion may well be the case. However, we should not presume this to be so. An assumption that all participants will complete the sentence in the same way is also highly problematic.

(b) Statements that suggest that all members of a particular religion share identical beliefs and practices should be avoided. ‘All Christians believe in the evolution of species’. ‘Jews never drive cars on Shabbat’. ‘Sikhs never shave their beards.’ ‘All Buddhists are pacifists’.

(c) Expressions such as ‘non-Christians’, ‘non-Muslims’, ‘non-Aborigines’ should also be used with great care in interfaith dialogue situations. Few of us appreciate being referred to in such terms. Our religious, racial and national identities reside primarily in what we are, not in what we are not.

## **Aims and Outcomes**

The formulation of aims for any group presents challenges. The illustration given here is an example of a set of aims for a local interfaith group. The adoption of such a set of aims reflects a view that participants are already comfortable with the idea of interfaith activities.

### **Aims of a local interfaith group.**

- To provide informal social occasions where members of different Faith communities can strengthen their personal relations with one another;
- To provide educational opportunities for people to learn more about each other's Faith and practice;
- To organize major public multifaith and interfaith events that promote the interfaith message within the wider community;
- To engage in or sponsor practical interfaith projects with a local and/or international focus.

(North Brisbane Interfaith Group, 2008)

These aims are programmatic and specific. They keep the intentions of the group very concrete and any achievement of them is observable and measurable.

A far more complex set of observations is required to identify what is happening as a result of interfaith activities. Attempts to state intended outcomes can be more abstract and generalized than the stated aims suggested for local interfaith groups. In general they denote long-term visions, hopes and aspirations. Perhaps this reflects the nature of religion itself. Actual outcomes resulting from sustained participation in interfaith dialogue will include both intended and unintended consequences and these are far more difficult to observe and measure. The examples offered here include references to changes likely to occur in the personal life and understanding of participants. Others anticipate some impacts on the larger life of particular religious communities, while others envisage ways in which the whole enterprise of interfaith activity might reshape the global religious landscape.

### **Intended Outcomes**

- Participants will recognize stereotypical understandings of their own and of other people's religious faith and practice and will endeavour to modify these through study and personal conversation with each other;
- Participants will develop a desire to move out of their own religious comfort zone and move, for a time, into other people's realms of belief, spirituality, ethical mores, ceremonies, rituals and festivals;
- Participants will seek to join with people of other religions in public multifaith events where each religion's distinctive identity is recognized, while, at the same time, sharing a common interest in or concern for a particular occasion or issue;
- Participants will recognize some of the ways in which members of their own religious community have in times past and in some contemporary situations, contributed to hurtful and sometimes disastrous consequences for members of other communities;
- Participants will recognize the significant role played by religious belief and commitment in shaping each cultural, racial and national group's self-understanding and aspirations. They will also explore ways in

which embracing these different understandings and hopes as positive forces in the ongoing development of the rich fabric of humanity, can be one contributing factor in the search for global peace and harmony.

## **Conclusion**

The need to respond to the plurality of religions is not new. Many followers of particular religions can detect an awareness of this in some of their ancient sacred texts and throughout the long histories of their particular tradition. However, the contemporary life experience of people living in the *Global Village* throws a bright spotlight on the reality of religious pluralism and its demands for serious attention and considered responses. This paper has argued that any serious and sincere attempt to establish a sustained dialogue on this subject can only deliver positive and constructive outcomes when participants embrace religious diversity as a natural feature of life and experience.

The desire among religious people to respond positively to religious diversity is widespread and growing. At a basic level this expresses itself in programs designed to bring members of different religions together to develop friendships, increase their knowledge and understanding of each other's traditions and work together on some community project. However, alongside these very practical activities there is growing concern among members of the various religions about where all this interfaith activity might be heading. In general terms this paper advances the view that members of each of the religions can be enriched intellectually and spirituality through interfaith dialogue. Dialogue is a two-way process. Participants should expect to give and to receive knowledge and inspiration from one another. The paper also suggests that participation in dialogue may counter misunderstanding and any dangerous reliance on stereotypes. Dialogue might even challenge religious extremism and inter-religious conflict.

## **A Personal Footnote**

While I have endeavoured to maintain a broad perspective I must declare that I am a Christian. I am a Christian because I have been born into a Christian cultural tradition. My particular understanding and practice of a Christian way of life comes largely from my family heritage and nurturing. My current personal faith and commitments draw inspiration from the one we Christians call 'Our Lord Jesus Christ'.

In closing I offer this personal adaptation of a traditional Christian benediction. In doing this I hope to illustrate both my personal Christian commitment and my commitment to the aims and practice of interfaith dialogue.

*The grace of our Lord - Jesus Christ;  
The love of God - the infinite mystery that stimulates our curiosity and enlivens our  
imagination;  
The Spirit of friendship - who constantly nudges us towards mutual respect, compassion,  
harmony and peace;*

*Be with us all.*

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