

Inter-faith Bridgebuilding

David kilgour

Muslim-Christian Dialogue Event

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The link between religious intolerance and political instability/violence is explained by Canadian journalist Geoffrey Johnston: "Those countries that do not actively protect religious minorities or prosecute the perpetrators of religiously-motivated violence are ultimately undermining their own security. A climate of impunity tends to embolden militants, who eventually turn against the state, using violence to advance their agenda."

Sri Lanka in the 1980s, Nigeria especially in recent years and Pakistan over many years-all are examples of governments that have allowed extremist groups to attack religious or cultural minority communities before they themselves became the targets of terror strikes.

If spiritual communities stand shoulder-to-shoulder when anyone in our own or another is being persecuted, lives can be saved. For example, two decades ago hundreds of persons of many faiths demonstrated at Edmonton city hall concerning the persecution of Muslims in Bosnia. Later, many of us did the same at the legislative assembly over the persecution of Christians in Pakistan. Thousands of Canadian soldiers did join the NATO peacemakers that eventually went into the Balkans.

Linking

This evening, however, I would like to propose that we shift from the often difficult goal of trying to correct wrongs to the positive one of building interfaith bridges through giving praise, educating for a peaceful future and remembering the core tenets of most if not all world religions:

1-Giving praise when due to those who reach out with peaceful remedies to misunderstanding and discord.

For example, praise these days might well be given to:

- Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood for announcing that it was determined to protect Coptic Christian churches during their religious celebrations in January 2012 and that it was calling upon the military authorities to ensure proper protection for Coptic churches;

- Canada's Islamic Supreme Council (ISCC) for reassuring Canadians by declaring that there is no justification in Islam for honour killings, domestic violence and misogyny;
- The Az-Zahraa Islamic Centre in Richmond, British Columbia for countering misconceptions by welcoming the general public to an open house at its Shia mosque in late January, 2012.

2-Educating ourselves and our children for more peaceful and harmonious futures

Peace remains central to three major Western religious traditions of
 Islam “Salaam alaikum”
 Judaism “Shalom aleichem”
 Christianity “Pax vobiscum” (Peace be with you.)

Peace is not merely the cessation of violence. As the South African anti-apartheid campaigner Alan Boesak aptly observed, “Peace is more than the absence of war; it is the pursuit of active justice.”

To quote from *Proverbs*, Chapter 15: “The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out.”

Erin Andersson of *The Globe and Mail* has noted usefully:

- Recognizing a need for greater understanding of a significant force in the world, especially since 9/11, (Canadian) universities have expanded their religious studies; in Quebec, high-school students are required to take a world religion course to graduate.
- A new program at the University of Toronto will bring together students from different faiths for discussions. At the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, an exhibition called ‘God(s): The User Guide’ seeks to provide that education to a broader public...The exhibition doesn't cover religious conflict. It focuses on what unites different religions in their varying rituals and milestones - the ‘everyday’....”

Our Canadian educational systems, along with counterparts in other multi-party democracies, aspires to provide teachers, instructional materials and schools which foster:

- tolerance of, and friendship among all cultures and religions,
- equality and full rights of citizenship for all, and
- the notion of working together to achieve common good.

3-Remembering that care and compassion are at the core of most religions.

Examples abound, but we are often so distracted by perceived and real wrongs that we don't sufficiently acknowledge the good that is taking place. Here are three instances:

- A Burnaby, B.C-based religious group, the Sanatan Dharm Cultural Society, owns land on which it plans to build a Hindu temple and a seniors' home. The remaining three acres of the group's property is unused agricultural land. Realizing that land and capital costs are the biggest impediments facing young farmers, particularly in the urban environment, the society (led by a former dairy farmer from Fiji) has decided to lease the property at a token fee for five years to young urban farmers - all small-scale and organic in practice. The young farmers, needless to say, are overjoyed by the society's generous gesture.
- The Tzu Chi Foundation, a Buddhist charity founded in Taiwan, is quietly doing compassionate work throughout the world. Quoting from one of its prayers:

“... From all corners of the world
Let us join our hearts and pray
For a world of harmony and peace
... All united with one heart.”
- The Canadian Intercultural Dialogue Centre (CIDC) was founded in 2005 by the Turkish community in Canada. Its purpose is to foster intercultural dialogue and provide a platform for education and information exchange. Its principal goal is to promote love and understanding amongst people of diverse faiths and cultures. Its goal is to create a heterogeneous environment that magnifies dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation.

One of the components of the CIDC is the Damla Foundation, which has shared its 'Noah's Pudding Day' celebrations with Anglican and Presbyterian churches in West Vancouver, B.C. In so doing, it has laid the foundation for friendship and understanding.

Conclusion

The well-being of our shrunken planet depends to a significant degree on the effective promotion of interfaith dialogues such as this one this evening. We have come from the same roots and are nourished by the same source.

Sadly, we have lived as spiritual rivals-or much worse- for centuries.

The time has come to embrace our common points and share the responsibility of building a peaceful world for humanity. It's a duty which falls not only on our shoulders as Christians and Muslims, but also on those of members of all sorts of beliefs.

Let us, therefore, continue to devote ourselves to the promotion of dialogue among beliefs in order to increase understanding and spread peace in our battered world.