

Does faith build bridges or barriers?

- talks given at a meeting of the East London Three Faiths Forum, 26th January 2017
at St John's Church, Seven Kings

A) **Rabbi Henry Goldstein**

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Every religious group has its own particular, traditional characteristics which have developed over centuries; not only in matters of belief, but especially in terms of practice. Sometimes these have developed in isolation, sometimes as result of contact with other religions. The overall result is a number of different spiritual groups. To each their way is the most desirable for them. They may even claim that their religious outlook is the best.....though perhaps they should add: the best for them. What we have in the world is a diversity of religions. We rejoice in the diversity of the animal and plant world. We also ought to rejoice in the diversity of human life including its various religious outlooks. Sir Isaiah Berlin in one of his books: 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' writes about an Italian thinker of the European enlightenment in the early 18th century, Giambattista Vico. Signor Vico wrote that every group has its own vision of reality and that that vision is conveyed sometimes in forms of worship, using its own language. This, I would say, is a very important aspect of the reality and glory of human diversity and what should support this is the human right to be of a particular group, even though this at times this may encourage separation, barriers and a negativity. And also what may be called an in-Ghetto attitude. But what we do not believe or do not do, those things specific for us, can be very important in leading a strong life of our own choosing (and, we hope, God's choice for us) and for defining what we are.

In the study of Judaism this is called the aspect of Jewish Particularism. But in being Jewish the Particular has to go hand in hand with the Universal for this is for us the complete nature of being Jewish. We all have to be both particularistic and universal with all its consequences of withdrawal at times on the one hand, but also it demands contact with our fellow human beings. It is the paradox inherent in all creeds and outlooks and you have to live with the tension between the Particular and the Universal. Your particularity, your distinctiveness, your sometimes ghetto mentality, as some may call it, ought to be respected deservedly by others and understood, although some aspects of a separate religious life may also be open to criticism by others for reasons, good or bad, and may require some kind of a dialogue. The Universal, the idea of One God, the idea of the unity of the human species, plus a set of several universal commandments said to have been given to all the 'Sons of Noah, were all stated in the earliest pages of Judaism's sacred literature. Judaism makes no claim to be the universal religion, just a religion for Jews, but it is not solely a particularistic religion with a ghetto mentality. Generally speaking this is true of the main religions of Britain today. We all live in our particular ways but there also is a universal aspect to our lives, a common ground, and this should bring us together and it fits our common awareness of being of a borough, of a nation state and as I would put of a neighbourhood, of a place of neighbours. We all have to understand our neighbour and know something of his or her ways and we will, of course find differences of practice and of outlook. This is why organisations such as this are of tremendous importance. But we also have to have contact, because we of one species and there is but One God.

Some years ago I was involved with a local Council of Faiths; a grouping of members of particularistic faiths who loved to tell each other what they did – and I think they came to like each others company. Every year in our neighbourhood we organised a number of joint events, but the best was an idea from the founder of the group, a Methodist minister. Every July we would have a celebration of faiths at the old bandstand in Valentines Park. Each group would put on something particular about themselves: dancing, choirs or solo singing, music and speeches. Joining our own audience of diverse religions were others of diverse habit strolling by and who stayed to watch. A little further beyond our celebration at the bandstand in the Park were people walking, sitting and chatting. Children were playing, and others were enjoying tennis, putting, boating or just sitting in the sunshine. For a few years I was the MC and one year I had a kind of vision up there on the bandstand, that this is what we in Judaism call the Messianic age will be like. The culmination of all human life. It would be like an English park on a sunny, summer, Sunday-like afternoon. In this garden setting of relaxation all of us were being our particular selves, showing our diversity, and yet finding our universalism by relating our humanity to each other. In this way we were all praising that an elusive entity made firmer by faith, the Supreme Being. It was an occasion of diversity but also of human unity and Universalism. We were not huddled in our little, cosy ghettos but on this occasion we were neighbours and fellow citizens.

We were all living not just in a ‘neighbourhood’ but also according to the concept of ‘neighbourhood’ in the same sense as brotherhood and sisterhood---finding our common ground. We were still diverse, different, inhabitants of our religious uniqueness, our ghettos, but the famous commandment, the golden rule in the Hebrew Bible, is ‘love your neighbour’ as yourself. Your Neighbour is really anyone with whom you are in regular contact. But why does it add in particular ‘as yourself’? Because, as my teacher Rabbi Dr. Ignaz Maybaum said: because your neighbour is not the same as yourself in way of life. We all have our distinct way, our particularism. You have to be yourself, and true to yourself - with barriers. But ghetto living as a total way of life means you cannot fulfil yourself totally as a human being without also having a universal outlook. You also have to build bridges based on your own affection for yourself. You have to live according to ‘neighbourhood’, doing neighbour-good.

B) Revd Santou Beurklian-Carter

Curate at St Mary’s Church, Woodford

As I was reflecting on how to answer this question, it occurred to me that I need to make an important distinction about this question.

If faith is defined as a sense of trust and relationship with God, then yes, faith does build bridges.

In Christianity, scholars have dubbed Jesus the new Jacob’s ladder, creating a bridge between God in heaven and the earthly world.

A key belief of Christianity is that Jesus died on the cross to make peace between humanity and God – to reconcile people and bring people back to a God consciousness in their lives. In 2 Cor. 5:9 it says God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, no longer counting people's sins against them.

So the Christian faith is about building bridges, making peace, and reconciliation, and I'll give some examples of how Christians are doing this towards the end of my presentation.

But if the word faith was replaced by the word religion and the question tonight was 'does *religion* build bridges or barriers' then the answer is – it depends on the practice.

Some religious practices within faith traditions do create barriers – and some create bridges.

I'd like to start by pointing out the barriers first.

- 1) If scripture is interpreted literally or dogmatically and conveyed (particularly within interfaith dialogue) without a sense of openness and accommodation of different viewpoints, then yes, religious practice can be a barrier.
Martyrdom, for example, is to *die* (personally) for your faith, not to *kill* (others) for your faith.
An example of this historically would be the so-called Holy War in the middle ages, for which many Christians are embarrassed and regret. We all know today of modern terrorist attacks done in the name of faith. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book Not In God's Name rebukes those who kill in the name of the God of life, wage war in the name of the God of peace, and hate in the name of the God of love, and commit cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.
- 2) Another example of barriers to faith (although not condoned religious practice but which happens anyway) is the abuse of power by clerics, which can erode trust and faith in God within individuals and groups of people.
- 3) Language within worship services can also be a barrier to faith. I can speak personally of my own time as a child worshipping in my parents church which used an ancient language that I didn't understand, which created a barrier to deepening my understanding and faith development. And I know from listening to other women who would hear scripture read from an older version of the Bible which only referred to people as man or mankind, rather than using inclusive language, and then feel angry and deliberately excluded, and that would create a barrier for them.
- 4) Our approach to gender issues can also be a barrier. I'm not going to go into the various conservative or traditional strands of the Christian Church which bar women from applying or pursuing a leadership position in the Church simply due to the fact that they are women because I have already spoken about that last year at another 3 Faiths Forum meeting. But it is worth pointing out, nonetheless, tonight.
- 5) Some critics of religion as a whole, such as Richard Dawkins, would say Christianity in general is a barrier to developing critical thinking skills and other such nonsense.

I'd like to take some time now for us to consider some of the positives that religious practices have on our faith.

- 1) Prayer builds bridges. Within the breadth of Christian practices, some Christians have set times and set words that they use for prayer, while some are more fluid and varied about the time and styles of prayer. Some use a walking prayer, such as a Labyrinth; some use contemplative or meditative prayer, which is sitting in silence and focusing on a word, phrase, candlelight, etc.). There are many examples of different types of prayer that helps people develop their faith in God.

- 2) Social action is another example of religious practice that helps develop not only solidarity in humanity (as Jesus demonstrated with his life and ministry) but a connection to God and fulfilling God's Kingdom on earth. Saints such as St Francis and St Catherine of Siena were known to have practiced the Robin Hood technique of taking from the rich (i.e. in their case, taking from their wealthy parents without asking) and giving to the poor. There are plenty of other examples in modern times as well. Martin Luther King Jr and his civil rights movement, and Nelson Mandela's movement to abolish apartheid comes to mind as messages of the Gospel that we are all loved, worthy and made in God's image.
- 3) The practice of almsgiving or giving to mission societies, such as Christian Aid and Tear Fund, to help the less fortunate, is a way of building bridges to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor - and is something that I think is a religious practice that is shared across all religions.
- 4) Within the Christian tradition there are particular strands which have particularly emphasized peacemaking as a core characteristic of their faith, such as the Quakers, the Mennonites, The Brethren Church, the Amish, etc.

For example:

- a) the Quakers were known to be conscientious objectors during WWII in Britain, claiming that their religious beliefs were incongruous with fighting in the War
- b) the Mennonites were known for their prison reforms and rehabilitation of prisoners back into society
- c) the Christian Peacemaker Teams is an organization which has its initial roots among Mennonites, Church of the Brethren and the Quakers but has spread into a broad ecumenical network that supports:
 - biblically based and spiritually-centered peacemaking
 - creative public witness
 - nonviolent direct action
 - and protection of human rights.

And they've got some good training resources on their website if you're interested at Christian Peacemaker Teams (<http://www.cpt.org/>).

d) Another recent charity that has come out of the Mennonite movement is an organization called Bridge Builders Ministries. It works on an educational level to train people to engage in conflict transformation practices. I'm offering a new training course they've developed during the Saturdays in Feb next month about conflict transformation. More information can be found on www.ticketsource.co.uk/event/161709

e) The Church of England is another example of the Christian Church attempting to build bridges between the disadvantaged and politicians, by holding Parliament to account for its policies. Our Bishops sit in the House of Lords and try to keep politicians ethically-minded and responsible. And just today, I received some flyers in the post about some lectures at Westminster Abbey, which will be engaging politicians on the topic of Integrity. More information can be found on www.westminster-abbey.org/institute

I'd like to conclude with a quote from Pope Francis which he made about this time last year about the then U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump who said he would build a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border if he were elected president - and which is coming to pass as we stand here today: "A person who thinks only about building walls and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the Gospel," (the Pope said on Feb. 18, 2016). [<http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-person-who-thinks-only-about-building-walls-not-building-bridges-is-no>]

Thank you for listening.

C) Sheikh Ayub Rashid,
Scholar at Eton Road Muslim Community Centre

Introduction

Jamal Badawi, a Muslim scholar, says 'With nearly one billion followers each, Islam and Christianity are major religions that influence the thinking and values of over 40 percent of the world population. While there are theological differences, some of which might be significant, there are nonetheless other important areas of belief that are shared by both communities: belief in Allah, or God; belief in revelation, in prophets, in the Holy Books of Allah; in the life hereafter and in a divinely inspired moral code organizing and regulating human life during our earthly journey to eternity'. (<http://www.islamicity.org>)

This can apply to the people of the three Abrahamic faiths; Jews, Christians and Muslims

We WANT to know and recognise one another; we live close but it seems we are far away from one another!

We want dialogue with others...

We all need a constructive dialogue, something which is commendable by all sane people.

In the Qur'an we read,

'Say, 'O people of the Book' (a term which particularly refers to Jews and Christians) 'come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him (in His powers and divine attributes); that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah.' If then they turn back say you 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.' (Bow) to the will of God."

(Chapter al-Imran;3:64)

Do we strive to be one?

Allah says in the Qur'an: "... If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but His plan is to test you in what He has given you. So strive as in a race in all virtues. The return of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute.' (al-Ma'idah; 5:51)

What do we need?

- We need people who will dedicate themselves to fostering unity and solidarity among people of all backgrounds.

- We need healthy relations, productive engagement and social change amongst people of faiths

We need to build relationships between Muslims Christians and Jews, so they can transform their communities through lasting partnerships. (<http://www.progressiverenewal.org>)

Islam in Habasha

In the early days of Islam in Makkah, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), saw some of his close companions being persecuted by some of those who opposed Islam. He did not have a big number of Muslims at that time. The persecution continued to the level that it was unbearable. Prophet Muhammad asked some of his companions to migrate to Habasha, or Abyssinia, Ethiopia today, in Africa. He told them to migrate there since there was a king who would not persecute anyone and no one would be persecuted in his country because of his faith or belief. Some men and Muslim women migrated there! They lived peacefully, with non-Muslims!

Here, we see how faiths bridged the gap between one another.

The advice of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib

When the cousin of the prophet Muhammad, known as Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, became Caliph of Muslims, he sent his governor to Egypt to represent him.

Ali bin Abi Talib gave his instructions to Malik al Ashtar, and in one of them he said to him ‘a human being is either your brother in faith or your equal in humanity’

Finally,

I believe there is sufficient common ground for Jews and Christians and Muslims and other people of no faith to meet, to understand each other, to join hands and to move together in the Path of Truth, Peace, Tranquillity, Justice and Fairness, in order to build bridges and not barriers

This is the Path of humanity; it is the Allah. God the almighty.

Thank you