

Religious Conflict and Interfaithism.

By Colin Wilks

The Interfaith Movement aims to diminish the potential for *inter*-religious conflict in the modern world by promoting 'interfaith understanding'. Its effectiveness as a movement is however limited because the method it employs for promoting *inter*-religious harmony can only be employed at the risk of augmenting the potential for *intra*-religious disharmony within the very religions it is employed to *inter*-religiously harmonise.

Religion has been with us since we first became human, and despite the 'God-busting' efforts of evangelical atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, it will remain with us while ever the uniquely human needs to which it uniquely ministers remain with us.

The uniquely human needs to which religion uniquely ministers stem from the fact that, as humans, we have been alienated from the natural world of instinctual purposes in which non-human animals exist, and, as a consequence, have had to infuse our extra-instinctual existences with extra-instinctual purposes and meaning. However, while religion emerged in human history as a solution to the uniquely human problem of being human, other uniquely human problems emerged in the wake of the solution it provided, and the most obvious of these was the problem of *inter*-religious conflict.

The fact that different groups of humans developed different religious solutions to the uniquely human problem of being human did not immediately result in what might be termed '*genuine* inter-religious conflict'. There were no doubt conflicts from the very outset between different groups of humans who believed in different gods (or spirits), but they were not conflicts *about* the different gods the different groups believed in. While both sides in such conflicts may have called upon their gods to aide them in their conflict with the other, they were merely *pseudo* inter-religious conflicts because it was not the other's religious beliefs that were at issue.¹

It was not until certain groups of humans started believing that their gods – or more to the point their *God* – was the *only* God that the potential for *genuine* inter-religious conflict

¹ Of course, the distinction I have drawn here begs the question whether any religious conflicts have ever *really* been *genuine* religious conflicts.

emerged in human history; and, as my emphasis on ‘God’ singular is intended to highlight, it was the emergence of monotheism that triggered the emergence of *genuine* inter-religious conflict. But it was not the initial and insular Judaic form of monotheism that triggered it; it was the subsequent and all-embracing Christian and Islamic forms that emerged from the Judaic form, for where the Jews believed the one true God was their God and theirs alone, the Christians and Muslims believed the one true God was everyone’s God, and, thus, the God that everyone should believe in.

To complicate matters, however, the Christian and Islamic monotheists both believed that their own respective conception of the one true God was the one true conception of the one true God and, thus, the one true conception that everyone should believe in.

To the limited extent it ever actually occurs, *genuine* inter-religious conflict occurs not simply because one (or both) of the conflicting parties believes that what the other believes is wrong, but because one (or both) of the parties believes it (or they) have a religious duty to correct the error of the other’s ways.

There are various methods by means of which the more tolerant and peace-loving followers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (which are arguably the world’s most conflict-prone religions) have sought to diminish the potential for *inter*-religious conflict between their less tolerant and less peace-loving counterparts. Most of these methods have encouraged mutual toleration by encouraging believers to believe that it is only by the grace of God that they themselves are believers: from the Christian perspective ‘there but for the grace of God go I’; from the Muslim perspective ‘It is not for any soul to believe save for the permission of Allah’ (*Qur’an* 10:99-100), and, hence, there should be ‘no compulsion in religion’ (*Qur’an* 2:256). However, the somewhat different method on which I intend to focus is the method upon which the contemporary Interfaith Movement is based.

The Interfaith Movement is founded on the belief that *inter*-religious conflict can be more effectively diminished if, rather than simply tolerating each other ‘at a distance’, people from different religions get ‘up close and personal’; get to know each other as people and get to know each other’s religions from the inside out. In simple terms, the interfaith method for facilitating this coming together is simply a matter of people from different religions getting together and focussing on the beliefs they share in common rather than those that divide them.

In more complex terms, however, it is a far from simple matter of them subordinating their first order religions, that is, the religions they subscribe to as Jews, Christians or Muslims, to a second order religion in which the primary article of faith is that people from different first order religions can live together in harmony despite their differing first order religions.

In order to subordinate his first order religion to this second order religion, an interfaithist must not only subordinate any concrete, first order conception of God he entertains to an abstract, second order conception of God, he must subordinate any first order concerns he has about first order scriptural detail to a second order concern about the second order, interfaith 'message' that lies behind the first order scriptural detail. An instructive example of this works in practice is provided by Mark Dowd in his documentary *The Children of Abraham*.

At the beginning of his documentary, Dowd poses the question 'If Jews, Christians and Muslims are all children of Abraham, why is his family so horribly dysfunctional?' Because Abraham is a central religious figure in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it would be easy enough to assume that his centrality to all three religions could provide a basis for establishing some sorely needed common ground between them. Unfortunately, once we move beyond the fact that he is a central figure in all three religions to the differing scriptural narratives in which he centrally figures, any hope of him providing a basis for common ground where it is most needed quickly fades.

As Jews and Christians tell the story: toward the end of his life Abraham became desperate for a son, and because his wife Sarah was thought to be barren, he took her Egyptian maid, Hagar, as his second wife, and she bore him a son who he named Ishmael. Thirteen years later, however, Sarah miraculously conceived and bore him a second son who he named Isaac. After the birth of Isaac, Sarah persuaded Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael from the family. Some years later, God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and, being a devoted servant of God, he began making preparations to sacrifice his son. At the last moment, however, God intervened and told Abraham that He had just been testing his devotion and there was no need to carry through with the sacrifice.

As Muslims tell the story, however, it was not Isaac who God asked Abraham to sacrifice; it was Ishmael, and the difference is crucial because it is to Ishmael that Muslims trace the ancestry of the Prophet Muhammad.

The method by which interfaithists seek to ‘smooth over’ crucial differences of this kind is demonstrated in the following exchange I have transcribed from the *Children of Abraham*:

Mark Dowd: [Does] the fact that Jews and Christians think it was Isaac whom God asked Abraham to sacrifice, while Muslims think it was Ishmael, [pose] a problem for interfaith dialogue and the [prospects] of bringing greater harmony between the three religions?

Rabbi David Rosen: Well it could be a problem if your concern is whose text is right: your text or mine. But that is not a healthy approach to interfaith relations and interfaith dialogue. And therefore if we [ask] ‘what is the message behind the narrative?’ the identity of the characters is less important than what the message is conveying. I think we can go beyond this, and I think that is what we have to do. In dialogue [with Muslims] I have no problem saying ‘Isaac in my tradition’ and ‘Ishmael in yours’.

Mark Dowd: But would you be happy if it was in fact Ishmael whom God asked Abraham to sacrifice?

Rabbi David Rosen: it would make no difference to me in terms of the message.

If all Jews, Christians and Muslims were like Rabbi Rosen, and could so easily subordinate their concerns about first order scriptural detail to a second order concern about the second order message that lies behind the first order scriptural detail, there would be little if any potential for *inter*-religious conflict between Jews, Christians and Muslims. Unfortunately, most Jews, Christians and Muslims are not like Rabbi Rosen, and could not bring themselves to believe that it makes no difference whether it was Isaac or Ishmael who God asked Abraham to sacrifice. This is why the effectiveness of the Interfaith Movement is so profoundly limited; its method for diminishing the potential for inter-religious conflict can only be pushed so far before it begins to augment the potential for intra-religious conflict.

Intra-religious conflict is conflict that occurs within particular religions (or within denominations of particular religions). It takes many forms, but the specific form that concerns us is that which occurs between followers of a particular religion who have a more concrete-literal understanding of their religion and those who have a more abstract-metaphorical understanding.

While it may make no difference to Jews, Christians and Muslims who have a more abstract-metaphorical understanding of their religions, the identity of the son whom God asked Abraham to sacrifice makes all the difference in the world to Jews, Christians and Muslims who have a more concrete-literal understanding of their religions; and does so not simply because they all have a vested interest in it being one son or the other, but because if it makes no difference whether it was

Isaac or Ishmael, then perhaps it makes no difference whether God *really* asked Abraham to sacrifice one of them, and if it makes no difference whether God *really* asked Abraham to sacrifice one of them, then perhaps it also makes no difference whether there *really* was an Abraham, and if it makes no difference whether there really was an Abraham, then perhaps it also makes no difference whether

For Jews, Christians and Muslims who have a more concrete-literal understanding of their religion, believing that it makes no difference which son God asked Abraham to sacrifice would be like stepping onto a slippery slope that descends all the way to atheism. The fears such people have about this slippery slope – be they conscious or unconscious - are understandable, because it is far from clear how their more abstract-metaphorically inclined counterparts would secure themselves a theistic foothold somewhere short of atheism once stepping onto it.

Toward the end of his documentary, Mark Dowd stops to reflect on what he has learned in the process of making it:

Perhaps in the end it is not as helpful to talk about the differences between the three Abrahamic faiths as it is to talk about two different mindsets; on the one hand, the mindset of religious liberals who are open to dialogue, comfortable with their own religions, but happy to explore the minds of others, and, on the other hand, the mindset of religious fundamentalists who see everything in black and white and who are adamant that they and they alone possess the truth.

He then goes on to blame himself and other religious liberals for not doing more to address the problem of fundamentalism within their respective first order religions, but, as his documentary clearly demonstrates, there is very little that religious liberals can do about the problem of fundamentalism within their own respective first order religions, because religious fundamentalists have little respect for the opinions of their religiously liberal counterparts indeed; from their perspective, their religiously liberal counterparts are little more than closet atheists.

One of the uniquely human needs to which religion ministers is the need for ‘existential certainty’; and the more black and white the certainty it provides the more fully the need is met. The more they focus on the theological abstractions which *they* share in common, and the interfaith messages which *they* ‘see’ behind the first order scriptural narratives, the more the interfaith religious liberals undermine the literally-interpreted scriptural certainties on which the faith of their respective less-liberal religious counterparts is founded, and, thus, the more they distance themselves from the people they are *supposedly* hoping to exert a calming, interfaith influence upon.

I stress ‘supposedly’ because the interfaith mission, understood as a mission to establish common ground and inter-religious harmony where it is most sorely needed, is a ‘mission impossible’, because the people who are most sorely in need of inter-religious harmony, namely, the fundamentalists, are impervious to its methods. Indeed, it is fortunate that the circles in which interfaith religious liberals and religious fundamentalists move are very different, for if their circles ever actually crossed the ‘chemistry’ would be anything but calming.

This points to the fact that rather than being on a mission to spread the word of inter-religious harmony among the people who are most sorely in need of it, the interfaithists are instead on a mission to assure their humanist liberal counterparts (i) that they too are liberals (albeit, religious ones); (ii) that religion can be a force for good in the world, and (iii) that they, the forces of good religion, can secure the middle ground occupied by religiously moderate Jews, Christians and Muslims, and thereby prevent it from falling into fundamentalist hands.

As former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently put while elaborating on the mission statement of the ‘Faith Foundation’ he has founded (a branch of which is now operating in partnership with the University of Western Australia):

What I always say is [that] religion can be a force for good or for ill. The question is how do we promote it as a force for values common to all of humanity [presumably liberal values], for understanding, for respect towards each other, and how do we prevent it being a source of conflict. Religion can be a force for good and it cannot be, so let's work out how we promote it as a force for good and diminish its impact as a force for evil (*Lateline*, 7 June 2010).

But as I have shown, there is a very fine line that needs to be walked here, because if harmonising methods, such as the interfaith method, are pushed too far, indeed, if the *pushed* to any extent at all, they will simply push many otherwise moderate Jews, Christians and Muslims into the enemy's hands.

While ever the human needs to which religion ministers remain human needs, religion, in its various forms, will remain, and, while ever religion remains so too will the problem of religious conflict, because like so many of the other uniquely human problems with which humans have to deal it is a problem for which there is no perfect solution.

References

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Aired 7 June 2010.