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## **Religious Prejudice, Dialogue and Respect**

**by Yossi Ives**

We pay heavily for intolerance. The world has repeatedly been traumatised by racial or religious persecution. What can be done to eradicate prejudice? Recent times have seen a major effort to surmount the problem of religious prejudice. This battle has assumed many forms. Some fight it wherever it rears its ugly head. Others seek to protect the potential victims of discrimination.

The most comprehensive and noble

attempt is in the area of education. British schools, among others, have introduced into the curriculum the study of other religions and cultures. The theory is: you fear what you don't know; "fear of the unknown". Having encountered foreign cultures in the healthy classroom environment, it is hoped the student will then consider them "normal".

In the adult world, the struggle against religious prejudice has assumed serious proportions. Inter-faith groups have risen to prominence, especially in multi-ethnic communities. The Council of Christians and Jews is a national organisation committed "to work for the betterment of human relations, based on

mutual respect, understanding and goodwill". There is even talk of a Council for Jews and Moslems. Scores of similar organisations have been established in the last few decades. Their aim is to bridge the differences and foster goodwill between the various faith-groups. This, however, is where their similarities end. Their methods and attitudes vary considerably, as we shall see.

## **Paradox**

How does one deal with serious, genuine difference of opinion? How is one to respect another when according to his religion or philosophy he advocates nonsense and falsehood? Must one surrender one's intellectual integrity to participate in inter-faith dialogue?

Our goal is to foster respect for each other's views, to value another person's religion. Is it possible to respect a view or belief you consider profoundly ridiculous? It would appear possible only if a) he doesn't care much about his own views or b) he is willing to respect what - to his mind - is nonsense.

As to the first option, to use the Talmudic idiom, "are we dealing with fools?" Surely we are appealing to serious-minded individuals who take their beliefs earnestly. Additionally, if participating in the inter-faith dialogue requires compromising the integrity of one's ideas, little has been accomplished.

The second option is equally unacceptable. Are we calling

for a  
renunciation of  
values? Do we  
abandon the  
quest for truth?  
But truth must  
automatically  
disqualify  
something  
perceived upon  
investigation to  
be false? Does  
the inter-faith  
community  
only wish to  
attract  
ambivalent  
people who  
don't have firm  
opinions on  
right and  
wrong?

Will we be  
triumphant  
when no  
person can cite  
a single  
concept which  
they wholly  
disrespect,  
regardless  
whether it  
insults his  
moral or  
religious  
sense?

## **Forget to forgive?**

These  
questions lie at  
the very heart  
of inter-  
religious  
dialogue. When  
I posed this  
dilemma to  
acquaintances,  
I received a  
curious  
response. The  
problem is

dismissed as interesting but irrelevant. We concentrate, they said, on those things we have in common; we downplay the divisive issues. They strive to discover common ground, which then becomes the arena in which the dialogue is conducted. Indeed, a great deal of the literature on this topic focuses on celebrating the values we share. In summation: my colleagues decide to ignore the dilemma for the sake of unity. Very noble, but, I think, misguided.

The foregoing approach does not penetrate to the root of the issue. As in psychology, it is perilous to suppress the real issue. If, for whatever reason, the issue surfaces to the fore, what then? Will it not endanger the rather

precarious  
equilibrium? I  
believe we  
must search for  
stronger  
foundations.

Probe carefully  
and you will  
find that this co  
mpartmentalisa  
tion has an  
unfortunate  
consequence. It  
has limited the  
scope of the  
respect.

Confined as  
your  
interchange is  
to certain  
mutual, often  
rather  
restricted,  
areas, your  
respect is  
likewise  
limited. While  
the things we  
have in  
common foster  
goodwill, those  
aspects which  
are outside the  
range of  
discussion deny  
the person full  
respect. I  
believe we  
must find a  
broader basis  
for our respect.

## **Tolerance**

Before I offer  
some  
constructive  
comments, I  
would like to  
deal with two  
additional  
alternatives I  
have

encountered.  
Although  
prevalent, they  
are, to my  
mind,  
completely  
wrong. Let me  
explain.

We hear a  
great deal  
about  
"tolerance".  
However, more  
often than not  
it is  
condescending.  
It is almost like  
saying: You get  
on my nerves,  
you are a  
nuisance, but  
out of the  
goodness of my  
heart, I will  
tolerate you.  
Tolerance often  
implies  
sufferance and  
forbearance of  
an unpleasant  
situation one is  
powerless to  
change, rather  
like the way a  
person  
tolerates a  
mosquito on a  
summer's  
night. It is  
reminiscent of  
the way Jews  
were  
"tolerated" in  
certain  
Christian lands.

Tolerance can  
mean you are  
not deserving  
but, out of my  
sheer  
magnanimity, I  
will endure and

suffer your  
miserable  
existence. For  
this reason,  
tolerance tends  
to be  
ephemeral,  
with a short life-  
span indeed.  
Tolerance, I  
believe, can  
easily dissipate  
in trying  
conditions. One  
must have real,  
authentic  
respect for  
others; not a  
tolerance which  
is merely a  
form of self-  
inflicted  
restraint.

## **Relativity**

Then there is  
the intellectual  
approach of the  
modern,  
relativistic  
philosopher.  
Religious and  
moral values  
are all equal,  
they argue,  
neither one  
better or worse  
than another.

The relativist  
philosophers  
come in  
different  
shapes and  
sizes. Some  
argue that  
nothing is  
absolute,  
therefore the  
differences do  
not matter. If  
all values are  
essentially

personal opinions, not truths, there is no right opinion. Others claim all religions or cultures to be variations of the same thing, thus there are no real differences.

The relativist position makes a mockery of both religion and philosophy. If nothing is really wrong then nothing is really right. Accordingly, religion, merely a matter of opinion, is largely irrelevant. Such a form of religion need not exist altogether. Additionally, this approach would never work for someone who takes religion or values seriously. The potency of religion is that its adherents perceive it as authoritative. They are ten *commandments*, not ten suggestions. As Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks wrote in *The Persistence of*

*Faith*, "The problem is that giving many religions equal weight is not supportive of each but tends rapidly to relativise them." This distorted concept of tolerance may well have been the cause for Chesterton's misguided comment that toleration "is the virtue of people who do not believe in anything."

The purpose of inter-faith dialogue is to foster understanding despite real differences, not to relieve its members of the burden of their differences. The relativist abolishes or at least blurs the significance of the religious distinctions. But, it is easier to demolish than to build. We are seeking to create respect, despite absolute differences. This, the relativist fails to achieve.

## Overcoming Prejudice

Although we are discussing religion and culture, this is true in all areas. Facing historical injustices with a clear, serene mind is no mean feat. Having lost my entire maternal family in Germany, it is easy enough to carry negative feelings towards present-day Germans. This, of course, is counterproductive and irrational. It is nevertheless very easy to fall, as many do, into such a trap.

I have been in Germany many times and I know the feeling firsthand. It was at one such trip that I was contemplating our dilemma. I would like to put on paper the main points of the conclusion I reached on that occasion. I believe they may be a good

start for a philosophy of inter-religious dialogue.

## **Respect in a nutshell**

The principle can be condensed as follows:

*Respect is due to anyone, not despite or because, but totally irrespective of his or her faith.*

My point is that religion or culture plays absolutely no role regarding what I call "basic human respect".

Respect is not conditional. It is not earned by virtue and it is therefore also not lost by vice.

Because it is not conditional, it is not subject to change.

Respect means having an I-Thou, not I-It, relationship.

Respect is intrinsic to a person's quintessential humanness.

From a religious perspective, man's free

choice means  
he was created  
in the image of  
God. This is  
true of all  
humans and is  
the most  
profound basis  
for mutual  
respect.

This respect  
has no borders.  
It applies even  
to criminals.  
Not because  
you consider  
them a victim  
of a pathology  
as some  
psychiatrists  
do, but  
because evil as  
they may be,  
they are still  
human.

## **Respecting the person**

This then is my  
argument. I can  
fully respect a  
person without  
respecting a  
single one of  
his or her  
views.

Religious  
beliefs and  
values have no  
impact on basic  
human respect.  
Respect, we  
are saying, is  
independent of  
any such  
externals. So, a  
person need  
not change his  
views nor need  
he modify his  
opinions on

another religion. He respects another totally, irrespective of the others beliefs - *and that's what matters.* Even when I discover someone has ideas I find repugnant I still respect him, even while I wholly repudiate his views.

I have met people who claim, with a great deal of misguided pride, not to be two-faced. They argue against being, to use the Rabbinic phrase, "one thing in the mouth while quite another in the heart". They are too honest for that. In short, they claim to despise hypocrisy. They have no desire to be affable to someone whose most essential beliefs they denounce.

They make a crucial error. It

would indeed be hypocritical to feign acceptance of views, which you wholly reject. This has been my argument all along. My point, however, is that this should in no way affect or impinge on one's respect for the individual. One may very well have more or less respect for another person's philosophy, depending on one's opinion of its veracity. But person and opinion are not the same. This is not hypocrisy, as claimed, but the disentangling of two unrelated issues.

## **On educating respect**

Recently I have been talking to Christian teachers about Judaism, as it is studied in many schools as part of religious studies. The

teachers also maintain that knowledge of other faiths is indispensable to combat prejudice. While I don't totally disagree, I believe I have outlined above a more direct and effective approach. We need to develop techniques, which convey to the pupils the absurdity of prejudice.

Religious prejudice is based less on ignorance of the person's beliefs than on the absurd logic that withdraws respect. Children must be educated that basic human respect is unconditional, irrespective of one's beliefs, race or religion. They should be taught that a person is born with it, just as he is born with a nose and mouth. We must convey to the pupils that which Thomas Jefferson considered self-

evident "that all men are created equal". Equally deserving of respect.

Why is every human being intrinsically deserving of respect? How can one illustrate this idea? It can be tackled on religious, philosophical and even scientific grounds. This requires another essay, and should really be undertaken by experts in the individual fields. For illustration's sake alone, I will give one example of what I mean, merely to open further discussion.

## **The measure of the man**

Now the hero of a book and a Hollywood movie, the Elephant Man was not always such a celebrity. From the age of five, Joseph Merrick from Leicester

grew such  
horrible,  
indescribable  
physical  
deformities  
that he was  
called "the  
Elephant Man".  
When he was  
not hounded  
and  
persecuted, he  
was exhibited  
as a fairground  
freak. After  
much ordeal,  
he was  
rescued,  
housed and fed  
by the  
distinguished  
surgeon Sir  
Frederick  
Treves. To  
Treves"  
surprise, he  
discovered that  
beneath the  
mass of  
Merrick"s  
corrupting flesh  
lived a gentle  
and dignified  
spirit. In his  
words, "I  
supposed that  
Merrick was  
imbecile and  
had been  
imbecile from  
birth... I came  
to know that  
Merrick was  
highly  
intelligent, that  
he possessed  
an acute  
sensitivity."

In his short  
autobiography,  
Merrick  
concluded with  
a verse from a

poem by Isaac  
Watts:

*Were I so tall to  
reach the pole,  
Or grasp the  
ocean with my  
span,  
I must be  
measured by  
my soul,  
The mind's the  
standard of the  
man.*

Merrick's case  
is but one  
example of how  
wrong it is to  
be deceived by  
superficial  
exteriors. It is  
an inspiration.  
It is hard to be  
prejudiced after  
reading his  
story. A person  
perceived to be  
a near-beast  
turned out to  
be a most  
refined  
individual.

And so we  
should build  
our argument  
for human  
respect, and  
tackle prejudice  
head on. By  
emphasising  
the innate  
worth of every  
human being,  
we will deal  
prejudice a  
fatal blow.

Editorial remarks

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