Religious Prejudice, Dialogue and Respect

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Rabbi Yossi Ives, coordinator of the Lubavitch Foundation in Leeds, discusses the dilemmas of inter-religious dialogue and argues that respect for others is mandatory even if we do not accept their religious beliefs. Lubavitch is a very traditional branch of Orthodox Judaism.

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

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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 compartmentalisation 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 independet 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

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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.

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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.

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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 sensibility."

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

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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.

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