Naming, Growing, and Collaborating

30.06.2018 | Marcus Braybrooke*

What's in a name? In June, the Three Faiths Forum, founded 21 years ago in the UK, is changing its name to the Faith & Belief Forum. This reflects the way its work has expanded to include people of all faiths and beliefs, both religious and non-religious. Increasingly, the original name was seen as exclusive, and for a time the difficulty was evaded by using the initials '3FF.'

The late Sir Sigmund Sternberg and the late Sheik Zaki Badawi, I am sure, would have welcomed this new name for the organization we co-founded. All three of us were involved in a variety of interfaith organisations. But we felt at the time a particular need to engage the Muslim community more fully in interfaith work. This included Zaki Badawi asking me to lecture on Christianity to students at his Muslim College who were training to be imams. Aware of troubling stories about owning Christian scriptures in Pakistan, I hesitatingly asked him if I could give the students Bibles – and the College responded by offering to pay for them! I wonder how many Christian seminaries give their students copies of the Qur'an or the Bhagavad Gita?

Today, as Phil Champain, director of the Faith & Belief Forum says, "We remain committed to the vision of our founders, to a connected and supportive society where people of different faiths, beliefs, and cultures have strong, productive and lasting relations … The UK is facing fast-paced demographic change, rising social and economic inequality, and increasing levels of hate crime. Social divisions along faith and cultural lines have been amplified. Through our learning and training activities the Forum creates much needed dialogue space, developing and supporting a new and inclusive leadership. This allows people to see potential in our differences and work collaboratively to erode the factors that threaten to divide."

The Many Meanings of 'Faith'

The change of name reflects an interesting change in the meaning attached to the word 'faith.' When he founded the World Congress of Faiths, Francis Younghusband deliberately chose the word 'faith' rather than religion because he wanted to emphasise that WCF is a fellowship of individuals, not representatives of particular religions. Today, however, we talk of 'faith communities' – and faith often becomes a badge of identity, often indicating what we should wear, what we should eat, or not eat, and whom we should marry.

This means that interfaith work needs to include bringing members of different communities together. It happens in many ways – visiting places of worship, greeting each other on our respective festivals, meeting and talking and, of course, eating with people of other faiths. This cultural work is central in the activities of most interfaith groups. Not everyone wants to discuss religion. Meals, music, and sports help bring people together.

The Pontamina Interreligious Choir (Pontamina means 'spiritual bridge') started 20 years ago and has emerged as one of the most important actors in interreligious peacemaking in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Sport is also important. In Israel one peace group gathered Israeli and Palestinian youngsters together to play football, dividing them up so that each team was half Israeli and half Palestinian. Pope Francis is promoting youth sports leagues throughout Europe, which includes sponsoring Vatican teams.

Perhaps the word ‘faith’ itself is too exclusive? Any attempt to engage with the whole community needs to involve, humanists, agnostics, secularists, and atheists. Would all these describe themselves as ‘believers’? Then there are those who call themselves ‘spiritual and not religious.’ Some who are inspired by the mystics prefer to talk of ‘interspirituality’ – a dimension that interfaith cannot afford to lose.

Some may think this discussion is not important. Humpty Dumpty, in Alice in Wonderland, says, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.” To which Alice replies, “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

Perhaps the student-led conference in July being arranged by the World Congress of Faiths will bring more clarity. Their theme: “Interfaith Practice: Current Research and Future Action.” As we think about the future of the interfaith movement (or should it be ‘movements’?), it is critical for groups to be clear about their purpose and particular contribution to a better world, and also to be collaborative with other groups. The work is too important to waste resources.

Getting Grounded in Collaboration

This is why, as Phil Champain makes clear, we must work together. “We want to help erode the impact of persistent and interconnected ‘dividers,’ which include rising economic inequality, divisions along faith and cultural lines, and the separation being created as society changes how it engages and connects,” he says.

To gather support for its inclusive vision, the Faith & Belief Forum is launching a Charter for Faith & Belief Inclusion, based on three principles:

1. We believe in an inclusive society where people of different faiths and beliefs have strong and positive relations. We believe that intolerance has no place in our communities or workplaces, and that diversity adds value to our society.
2. By connecting people of different faiths and beliefs, we can create a society which is fair to people of all backgrounds – religious and non-religious. We encourage people to engage more across differences and learn to understand each other better.
3. We recognise the need to create a more open conversation about faith and belief in our communities and in all of the UK. We will have these conversations in a spirit of mutual respect and curiosity, and be open to different perspectives.

The Forum is inviting organisations across the UK to commit to working together in a spirit of partnership, and to promote good relations between people of different faiths and beliefs in communities, workplaces, and online. You too can endorse the Charter here.

I hope that the “Reimagining Interfaiths” gathering in Washington DC this July and the Parliament of World Religions in Toronto in November will encourage a similar spirit of partnership.

Rev. Dr. Marcus Braybrooke is a retired Anglican parish priest, living near Oxford, England. He has been involved in interfaith work for nearly fifty years. He joined the World Congress of Faiths in 1964 and is now president. He served as executive director of the Council of Christians and Jews from 1984 to 1988, is a co-founder of the Three Faiths Forum and patron of the International Interfaith Centre at Oxford. He has travelled widely to attend interfaith conferences and to lecture. Professor Braybrooke is author of over forty books on world religions, including *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (1992), the history of the interfaith movement’s first century. A number of his books address shared worship, prayer, and meditation. In September 2004 the Archbishop of Canterbury awarded him with the Lambeth Doctorate of Divinity “in recognition of his contribution to the development of interreligious cooperation and

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understanding throughout the world.”
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