Risks in Interfaith Dialogue

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Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Magonet considers the sensitivities and sacrifices necessary for real understanding and progress between faith communities.

Risks in Religious Dialogue

by Jonathan Magonet

Considering the sensitivities and sacrifices necessary for real understanding and progress between faith communities.

In dialogue there are a number of almost hidden issues that will play a major role in affecting the behaviour of the participants. The participant from a minority situation will often be aware of a degree of threat to his or her status before the dialogue even begins. This may have to do with being a relatively new arrival in the host society, such "newness" often stretching over a number of generations; or it may be because of

the fear of loss of identity through assimilation or acculturation to the majority society, a deeply disturbing experience even when no overt threat is being posed. The minority partner in dialogue does not start off on the same footing, and is often acutely aware of the fragility of his or her position *vis à vis* the other. This becomes magnified because of the responsibility he or she bears as a representative figure to those back home.

Religious dialogue demands great social sensitivity when people with these two different sets of perceptions meet. Those from the minority situation may experience their new partners from the host culture as singularly insensitive to the matters that concern them. This insensitivity can be experienced in apparently quite simple matters: to what extent has the host taken steps to ensure that the food, prayer facilities or other factors that are important to the minority group, have been made

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available - and not just available but explicitly offered? In such circumstances the host may take it as self-evident that if you need a room to pray in you will ask for it; the minority group may feel too insecure to make such a request and a suppressed anger bubbles under the surface. Those of the minority group who have gained experience of dialogue may feel sufficiently confident to make the appropriate requests or suggestions and those of the majority culture may likewise, in time, learn to ask what is needed. If we have guests to dinner we gradually learn to check out beforehand about particular food requirements if we are not to cause embarrassment or be embarrassed ourselves during the meal by some one"s inability to eat a particular dish. Yet it is surprising how insensitive some groups are to such obvious good manners when they enter the world of dialogue for the first time.

Pork

My favourite example concerns one of the first Jewi sh-Christian-Muslim meetings we held in Berlin at the end of the sixties. The Senate invited us to a reception at the Town Hall and presumably the caterer was instructed to lay on reception number 5a, drinks and hot snacks. So we arrived to a sumptuous range of pork sausages and rolled ham pieces, forbidden of course to both Jews and Muslims; and some delicious German wine - which the Jews, not being Orthodox, enjoyed, but the Muslims could not touch.

I mentioned the difference between Orthodox and other Jews in this respect because that also raises problems. Not all Jews are Orthodox, but in such circumstances a sensitive host will assume that they are and take appropriate action. The group of Jews, on the other hand, may find themselves asking for food to be prepared in such a way that Orthodox Jews would be free to participate, and themselves stick to the rules of kosher

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food, even if they might not usually do so in private. They will do so because of their feeling of solidarity with other Jews and to take seriously their own representative position. Such feelings may be compounded by the belief that it is necessary to show a unified Jewish position, and not expose the internal divisions that actually exist. Sometimes the minority group may even insist on conditions that they would not dream of requiring in their private capacity, precisely because they feel the need to make the point to their hosts. It is a kind of inverted expression of power and control in a situation experienced as one of relative powerlessness either at the present time or during the past relationships between the two groups. The net result is often a curious situation in which, out of the best motives and with the best will in the world, everyone is acting out an artificial role. It may take a long time before sufficient trust is established for these hidden

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agendas to be acknowledged.

For the past twenty years I have helped organise a Jewish-Christian-Muslim student conference at the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus in Bendorf on the Rhine, Germany. Each year we have to consider the issue of food and I have a little explanation that I tend to give. It is delivered with a degree of humour as a way of lightening some of the tensions that are inevitably present at the opening evening. However, by addressing the issue directly it is reassuring to those who are concerned about such things that their needs have been recognised and met. I point out that traditional Jews can only eat kosher meat that has been slaughtered and cooked in a particular way. Muslims similarly eat *Hallal* meat, but are also allowed to eat kosher meat, though traditional Jews will not eat *Hallal* meat. And Christians can eat almost anything!

Vegetarian

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Since the majority of people at these conferences from the beginning were Christians, with a gradually growing number of Jewish and Muslim participants over the years, in the first few years we laid on a vegetarian table for the Jews and Muslims. It should be pointed out that not all the Jewish participants felt so concerned about the Jewish dietary laws but, as I suggested before, it is often the case in such circumstances that they feel the need to show solidarity with traditional Jewish practices. This is a good example of how the loyalty issue can actually distort the real beliefs and actions of people from the minority group. However, the vegetarian table raised other problems. Some people felt that it defeated the purpose of a dialogue if some of the participants ate separately from the others, so out of solidarity with them they joined the vegetarian table. A few others did so as they just happened to like vegetarian food and thought this was a good

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opportunity to eat it. Soon the vegetarian table got so crowded that there was no room for the Jews and Muslims to sit there. At which point some of the Jews who were not so committed anyway to the Jewish dietary laws felt quite happy about joining a different table, which was good from the point of view of honesty and mixing, but rather bewildering for the kitchen. The whole thing was further compounded by the difficulties that the kitchen had in understanding precisely what these strange dietary restrictions meant.

However, to return to the saga of the vegetarian table. We hit on an ingenious solution. The following year we would make the entire conference vegetarian and in that way all of us would be equal and no-one need be segregated or offended. And that is how we ran it, except that I forgot to explain this on the opening night. So two days into the conference I had delegations of Jews and Muslims, very few Christians for some reason,

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coming to complain that there was no meat on offer! So now each year I explain - because another of the lessons of dialogue is that each occasion you have to start from scratch and can assume nothing. You personally have moved on, but the new partners are only at the beginning.

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