



Teaching Tolerance

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By Jonathan Romain

Did you hear the story about two nature enthusiasts on holiday in Africa, who suddenly found a rhinoceros charging towards them. One of them was about to flee when the other said "No need to panic, rhinoceroses are vegetarian." To which his companion replied "You know he is vegetarian and I know he is vegetarian, but does *he* know he is vegetarian?"

It is the same with the religious life in Great Britain and countless other countries. You need to know that they are multi-faith societies, with each one containing members of several different religions - but not everyone else in them is aware of that and sometimes those of the majority faith can think that they are the only faith.

That is something that was brought home to me very dramatically when I started visiting schools in Berkshire and giving talks on Judaism as part of the Religious education course ... and came in for a few shocks.

Actually it was the children who had the first surprise. When I entered the room, they were astounded - I looked normal! When they had been told that a rabbi was visiting them they had conjured up all sorts of images in their minds, such as an old man with a wild look, long beard and flowing robes. Instead they got me - 41, and with jacket and tie - and it was both a disappointment and a relief. Without even opening my mouth, it seems that I had taught them an important lesson: that Jews were ordinary people, looked the same as they did, dressed the same ... and from there it was a relatively short step to them realising that Jews might feel and think the same - in other words, be equally human.

... Different people can also be normal people

Then it was my turn for some surprises. For instance, at virtually every school to which I went, I was asked whether Jews had birthdays. "Yes, of course," I replied, "they are jolly good fun" - but I could not understand why it should be such a persistent question.

Eventually the reason became clear: there were usually one or two Jehovah's Witnesses at each school and they do *not* celebrate birthdays. The children made the simple but flawed deduction: Jehovah's Witnesses are different, Jews are different, so they must be similar to each other. Lesson two, therefore, was to accept each minority faith in its own right and not lump them together.

Garage Doors

Another puzzle was the question: "Is it true that the Jewish religion does not allow you to shut your garage doors at night?" What on earth was this all about? I thought. But again there was a simple and revealing explanation that can apply to many adults too.

It turned out that the child asking this question had Jewish neighbours who never closed their garage doors at night ... and so the assumption was immediately made that all other Jews did likewise! It highlighted the tendency many of us have to judge those who belong to a particular group as all being the same - be it religious or racial group -instead of treating them as individuals and judging them by their own characteristics.

This time it reminded me of another great writer, Charles Dickens, and his book *Our Mutual Friend* in which a Jew by the name of Fledgeby complains "Men find the bad among us easily enough - among what people are the bad not easily found? - but they take the worst of us as samples of the best; they take the lowest of us as presentations of the highest, and they say "All Jews are alike"."

That was written in the 1860s but it seems we still need to learn not to make sweeping generalisations in our attitude to others. This is why the work of The Council of Christians and Jews is still so important. My experiences in local English schools show that there is still enormous ignorance about minority faiths, and that must be even more so in less tolerant climates. Ignorance is so often the breeding ground for prejudice and we need to work hard at combating it at all levels.

But I shall leave the last word to one of the 11-year-olds I taught, who wrote to me afterwards: "Dear Rabbi, I was surprised to see you wearing a suit - I thought you would have a long white robe and sandals. I hope you like your religion as much as I did. It must be hard to keep all the rules. The Jewish religion sounds good but complicated. I hope your Messiah comes soon."

Me too.

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