

Interfaith Encounters: Debating, Dialogue and Dining

By Prof. Charles Selengut

This paper addresses and analyzes the nature and activity of the interfaith meetings sponsored by the Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace and the decades long efforts of its predecessor organizations such as New Ecumenical Research Association (New ERA), Council for the World's Religions (CWR), Religious Youth Service (RYS), and others. The treatise discusses the format, values and normative procedures of the conferences illustrating the successes of this corpus of interfaith work in fostering genuine religious dialogue and cooperation. The conferences and activist efforts were based upon respect for all religious traditions, free and open discussions and a willingness to recognize religious differences but to acknowledge and appreciate the value and validity of the world's religions. A goal of the project was to develop an understanding of the inner life of each tradition while seeing the commonalities in all traditions in their search and journey for faith and religious transcendence. The leadership of these organizations knew that in the twenty-first century in an age of globalization religions must come together to work for cooperation and world peace.

“Interfaith Encounters: Debating and Dialogue and Dining”

Charles Selengut

I begin with a **Talmudic** Story of Shamah and Hillel

- 1) Story of Convert- “ What is Hateful to you, do not do to someone else- all the rest of the Torah is commentary”
- 2) Differences between the two schools- White lies about Brides
- 3) And yet they respected each other, dined together and studied together- Eilu V'Eilu Divrei Elokim Chaim
- 4) Though the Shamaï school was more profound and more precise Jewish religious law follows the School of Hillel
- 5) Hillel studied and listed carefully the positions of Hillel while Shamaï was more dismissive. Th Talmud explains that listening and studying to an intellectual adversary brings wisdom and enhances one's own point of view.

And listening and studying the point of view, the positions, the faith and perspectives of those with whom one disagrees is the essence of genuine religious encounters and can lead to peaceful and harmonious relations been with people or groups with whom we have disagreements even serious and existential differences.

Frank Kaufmann and I have been involved in interfaith meetings and international conferences for over several decades mainly thru the **Inter Religious Federation for World Peace** but even before that by several other groups like New Era and the Council for the World's religions. These meetings turned out to be wonderful meeting places for world religious leaders and for scholars and academicians studying religion and the serious challenges facing religious communities in the age of globalization. The leadership of the IRFWP understood that as the twentieth century waned the old era of religious separatism, where each religious community held on either its own geographic or social spaces, where adherents living solely together with their own co-religionists all sharing a religious culture and sensibility was now over. In the age of globalization, international migration, global social media and world travel, no religion could remain ensconced in their religious enclave. In this new reality, what was in the past, the outsiders, the religious opposition, the heretics and even the enemy was now with us at work, in the supermarket, in the mall and was now likely our physician, teammate, banker or housekeeper. This new reality of living together in a pluralistic world requires a reorientation, a new way of religious commitment and faith. It necessitates a willingness to see other religious believers as worthy, to view their faith commitment as valid and genuine though it may not accord with our own deeply other religious convictions.

The IRFWP meetings were designed to meet these goals. Each meeting was planned to have people from the World's established and well-known religions as well representatives from new

religious movements including communities that were unpopular at the time and even stigmatized by the popular media. The participants were invited to an attractive venue, to dine together, to meet face to face in small sessions to discuss and debate and to experience the humanity, the commonalties and much of the sameness facing all religionists as well as acknowledging the theological and policy differences. This was conducted in a setting without conditions albeit in the understanding, as Martin Buber put it in meeting the other, as a Thou” willing hear and recognize the humanity of the other and see as Jewish theology asserts the “ the Tzlam Halohim”, the divine image ,value and validity in the many religious worldviews.

How was this accomplished? With a lot of hard work, financial resources and faith.

#1 DIGNITY

All the sponsoring organizations like the IRFWP had volunteers warmly welcome the participants and respond with awareness of their specific needs. Special food for particular religious needs were provided, time and space for prayer services were worked into the schedule and opportunity was made for those participants who wanted share a service or meditation with out side their religious community. I think a measure of the tolerance and amiability at these meeting were due to the fact that everyone felt that their particular needs were attended to and it was this openness that was and is unusual in interfaith meetings which was conducive to genuine dialogue.

On Important Example comes to mind: **Israel and Kiddush and no meetings on Friday in Cordoba**

This was not so easily achieved and there were mishaps. Please know that there were people attending these meetings who never had been to an international hotel, to whom Western style food and gender interactions were foreign and many had never been in the presence of nor confronted with people or religious ideas to which they were antagonistic or had never been in their religious imagination. Some people were freighted, deeply suspicious and ambivalent about the whole process as if to say “what I have gotten myself into?” Still in my view the sense of dignity and respect which was the governing norm help ease the many possible conflicts and difficulties. It was most moving to see how possible conflicts were resolved with theological reinterpretation.

Harrison Conference and food

Orthodox Jews attending Hindu Rites

#2 Uncensored Conference

The second important ingredient was the almost unparalleled freedom of expression and the refusal to demand conformity and political correctness. This was also made possible by the absence of any official representations. Some of the participants indeed were officials or officers in their respective religious communities but their participation was not in any official or formal

capacity. Please remember any number of participants had deeply held views on the nature of family, gender, religion and state which could have been anathema to others but I not recall any name calling or insult in the situation of hearing about or in support of a radically different religious outlook. It was wonderfully inspiring, for example, to see an American Feminist scholar explain at the coffee break that she learned much from a Middle Eastern Imam about the importance of authority and tradition in family life, though it challenged her commitment to personal freedom, individualism and her view of gender equality. I can still recall what was and remains for me and for many from Western traditions shocking depictions, even enactments, of tribal animistic rites. Still I remain thankful to have experienced such events which gave many me a deeper insight in the human search for a transcendent reality.

Academic discipline correctness – frequently more enforced than religious conformity- was likewise openly challenged. One highly regarded European sociologist of religion championing the then regnant view of secularization, arguing that orthodox theistic religious commitment will be impossible to maintain in the post-modern world was challenged by younger scholars who marshalled data and presented new theoretical paradigms exposing the fallacy of complete secularization. This was occurring before these new ideas now mainstream could be articulated at a academic conference or at organizations like the American Academy of Religion or the Society for the sociological Study of religion.

Perhaps the most exciting outcome of the openness and freedom at the meetings was the willingness of participants to articulate inter religious differences and even rifts in their own traditions. And this sometimes led to revelations from other participants sharing their own intra-group differences. What at first seemed theological unanimity turned out to be more complex and nuanced and again illustrated structural similarities in religious traditions

Arab Israeli peace settlement -peace positions and territorial expansion

Muntaz and Durkee

#3 The Importance of Setting

Dignity requires a material base. And this was an element in the mood and climate of the meetings. The hotels were chosen carefully to show respect for participants and to provide a comfortable atmosphere for conversation and reflection. There were well known plenary speakers from the many religious traditions and these major sessions added to the sense of dignity and significance of the meetings. On occasion, as in Corboba, at the Muslim Jewish conference, the Mayoress of the city addressed us telling about her own families descent from Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious roots and thanked us for encouraging dialogue. I found her talk moving as it again illustrated the complexity of religious identity. There also tours to local religious sites and time set for entertainment and exercise. My sense is that these material factors contribute much to the camaraderie of the meetings.

Reflections

Speaking personally, the most profound lesson I learned was to see the inner life of other religions, its logic, theological validity and emotional power.

-Jesus and Christianity –“how can one not love such a deity who gives his life for Humanity

-The power of brotherhood in Islam

- Unification’s commitment for unity

And I discovered all religions are not monolithic. All religions and all religionists have a different reading of the texts and traditions of their own religious traditions. Be careful when any Journalist says this is what Judaism believes or what Christianity says is truth or this is the genuine Buddhism or Hinduism. There is great theological differentiation and behavioral variety within all religious communities. There is no one Judaism but many Judaisms as there is no one Islam or one Catholicism.

Nothing said here today seeks to deny the small and large differences between the world’s religious communities, not only in ritual life or scriptural truth and perhaps most importantly in eschatological visions which often result in religious antagonism, conflict and violence.. These are real issues but permit me say after meeting so religious others I am less concerned. My experience and faith lead me to imagine that despite these real and ongoing differences, peace and harmony will triumph.

The similarities of everyday experiences showed the commonalities of religious life in the postmodern world. We are all facing common issues

Story of London Iman and extremists

Attracting Youth

Dealing with secular modernism

And finally, these meeting created a family of people who remain in touch and pass on the lessons learned in the classroom, in books published and in ongoing friendship.

I would be remiss if I did not mention issues and conflicts that arose.

Fear from conversion

Giving Honor to heretics and competing religions

Dialogue as leading to a diminution of faith

Conclusion **Krister Stendal**

“Holy Envy”

