

Interfaith Awareness: A New Model for the Future of the Practice of Ministry

Don Mackenzie

We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

—Mary Oliver, “Of the Empire” in *Red Bird*

Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one . . .

—Tom Joad to his mother in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*

Trying to find the path from the picture of despair that Mary Oliver conveys so well to the stunning insight from John Steinbeck that we are all connected at a very deep level frames the challenge for the practice of ministry as we move toward our future. Religion has always

Donald Mackenzie is a member of The Interfaith Amigos in Seattle, WA.
Email: donaldmackenzie@comast.com.

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claimed that deep in the human heart is the conviction that all being is interconnected—all being. This place, which is truly deep, is hard to access because of our egocentrism and preoccupations. Music can access it, eloquent speaking can access it, the preciousness of relationships can access it. Religion can access it too, but as long as it insists on separateness and superiority, religion cannot access it.

A deeper sensibility about religion could change the way we practice our ministry—the way we preach and order worship, provide pastoral care, and bring the healing teachings of our traditions to bear on the suffering, unhappiness, and *injustice* we encounter—and this would change the way we see our roles as religious leaders in relation to the roles of leaders of other traditions. It would help to overcome the “us against them” mentality that is so deeply ingrained in our work and replace that with a cooperative model that honors the best of all traditions and seeks to make use of all of them . *This deeper sensibility could provide a strong platform from which to dissent and to resist the strong grip that evil has on our troubled world.*

How can religion become more effective in helping to address the moral issues that we are facing? Not by remaining separate and claiming to be superior, but through cooperation and collaboration religion can make the most of its spiritual wisdom, whether it be Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, or Hinduism, or any spiritual path that helps to provide purpose and meaning to life and seeks to contribute to the common good.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

My two interfaith colleagues, Rabbi Ted Falcon and Imam Jamal Rahman, and I began working together in Seattle right after 9/11 on the conviction that if we could penetrate the barriers that have separated our traditions we could find ways to cooperate in addressing life’s problems. We began to meet weekly. Those weekly conversations were far-reaching and had no agenda except to try to understand our lives. We started by conducting programs in churches, synagogues, and a few Islamic centers. We hosted a radio program for a year and traveled to the Middle East twice. We have written three books on interfaith dialogue together¹ and have presented programs over 250 times in most states in the United States and also in Canada, Japan, and the Middle East. All the while, we were getting to know each other better and learning more and more about each other’s traditions

and realizing that that knowledge was taking each of us more deeply into our own traditions. Publicity from *The New York Times*, NPR, PBS, and other newspapers, magazines and media outlets gave us a platform from which to talk about our experience with interfaith dialogue.

THE SIX ESSENTIAL STEPS IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Although we did not set out to define how to engage in interfaith dialogue, we stumbled on the following six steps that reflect our experience with each other.

1. Get to know the other. This first step is not talking about either religion or spirituality but simply about getting to know each other as human beings. Over time, a trust can develop that can lead to openness as well as to courage.
2. Identify the core teaching in each tradition. While believers within each of our traditions vary in what they consider to be the bottom line of their religion, here is what we concluded through our dialogue. In Judaism, we speak of Oneness—not just one God but just One. Rabbi Ted makes reference to the book of Deuteronomy (6:4b): “The Eternal is our God, the Eternal is One.” In Christianity, we speak of unconditional love, of loving without conditions. The reality of this is not something to be chosen; it is a way of being that must be developed over time through spiritual practices. In Islam, we speak of compassion, a word that begins all but one of the chapters of the Qur’an. While each of these three teachings actually exists in each of the traditions, each tradition has its own point of focus. We understand this to be the bottom line.
3. Identify the sacred verses and spiritual practices that are consistent with each tradition’s core teachings. The point of focus of the core teaching of each tradition is an invitation to ask which Scriptural verses and spiritual practices in each of our traditions are consistent with our core teachings and which verses and practices are not consistent with our core teachings. *In general, we feel that those verses that are consistent with the core teachings represent a universal sensibility. Those verses and practice that are inconsistent with the core teachings are more likely to be particulars.* The universals are rooted in a spiritual wisdom that transcends traditions. The particulars are rooted in the concerns of the ego. We found the following categories of inconsistency: exclusivity; violence, the inequality of men and women, homophobia, and economic and racial injustice.
4. Develop trust. The integrity of the critical thinking involved in step 3 can lead to a trust that can help to move the conversation into the most difficult areas. For the Abrahamic faiths, the question of Israel and Palestine lies at the intersection of many common concerns. When Ted and Jamal and I were writing our first book, we each read to the others a passage we

had written concerning our first trip to the Middle East. In his reading, Jamal described the wall separating Israel and Palestine as belligerent. Ted broke in: "If that is in the book, I cannot be in the book." The pause following that was electric because we each knew that we had reached the place where most interfaith dialogue fails. Briefly, we felt heartbroken. But then, with the help of providence, I said, "What is the opportunity in this problem?" Again, there was silence. As the silence unfolded, we each began to see something new, and each of us said, in slightly different ways, "How does it feel to be Ted and how does it feel to be Jamal?"

In our debriefing, Ted said that it was the word "belligerent" that was problematic, not because he disagreed with it but because it would have a negative impact on his authority as a rabbi within the Jewish community. What could be said, we asked, that could convey the need for safety and security for the people of Israel and, at the same time, not be offensive to the people of Palestine? That question has yet to be answered by anyone. In Jamal's introduction to the topic, he described it as a controversial concrete wall that stems the flow of suicide bombers but also chokes the Palestinian economy.²

5. Experience the worship of other traditions. To have an appreciative understanding of other traditions, it is necessary to experience the worship of those other traditions. How do they do what we are all trying to do? One of our early findings was that interfaith worship tends to be show-and-tell and not really something that opens the heart to God. As a consequence, we decided that having worship in any one of our traditions would mean focusing on that tradition but could contain enrichment from the other two Abrahamic traditions. For example, a celebration of Passover in 2008 was held at my church, University Congregational United Church of Christ in Seattle. Members of all three congregations (the other two were Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue and Interfaith Community Sanctuary) were invited to attend. The service was a standard Jewish celebration of Passover except that Jamal and I were able to contribute stories from our traditions that mirrored the themes of Passover: the need to become "unstuck" from our places of imprisonment; the reality that every place of imprisonment can be a location for the efforts toward liberation; the reality that liberation can descend quickly into imprisonment. I used the stories of Holy Week as follows: the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday can be understood to represent imprisonment in the illusion that a military liberation was all that was needed; the movement through the events of Holy Week can be understood to mirror the time in the wilderness when discovering freedom also meant that the imprisonment of the mind and soul was still present and no outer liberation alone could change this. Jamal's story of the Hegira, the departure of Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to

Medina in the year 622 CE, contained the same themes of the need for liberation and the discovery that outer liberation is not sufficient—inner work must be done, and it must continue to be done even after arriving at the physical place of safety. The insight from the experience helped us to see that we are all imprisoned by things such as money, sex, art, power, politics, religion as well as the imprisoning aspects of the ego. It is almost impossible to put into words the thrill of cooperation and sharing of insights that brought the three of us and our congregations to a new place of connection.

6. Engage in spiritual practices. Spiritual practices are an essential ingredient in the life of the pilgrim toward spiritual wisdom and are also essential for the foundation of a spiritual community, a community where purpose can always find a healthful balance with institutional maintenance. When we took our first trip to the Middle East in November of 2005, we toured the countries of Israel and Palestine and gave teachings to our group of travelers concerning the various locations—each of us from our own traditions. When we reached the Sea of Galilee, I started with a commentary on a story in the Gospel of John (John 21:1–14) where, following the crucifixion, the disciples had gone fishing since that was what they knew how to do. Fishing seemed something familiar in the wake of the death of Jesus. They were not, however, catching any fish. The text reports that Jesus stood on the shore and asked them if they were catching any fish, and when they told him they had none, he suggested they try the other side of the boat. I was deep into my teaching, partly because I seemed to be standing on the very place where the story takes place. As I was concluding, Ted said, “Hey, let’s baptize everyone!” I panicked since, in my tradition, a baptism needs to take place within the worship of a loving and supportive congregation. It turned out that he meant that each of the three of us should give the forty participants in our trip a demonstration of the sacramental use of water in each of our traditions. Ted demonstrated the mikvah, the ritual cleansing with water; Jamal used water the way it is used to cleanse before prayers, called *wudu*; and I touched each person with water as I talked about the meaning of baptism as a symbol of inclusion and an illustration of the miracle of life itself—a brief synopsis of the meaning of the sacrament of baptism. Each of us thought that most of the Jews would go to Ted, most of the Christians would come to me, and a few of each would go to Jamal. As it turned out, everyone came to each of us and shed tears of joy. The emotion and sense of revelation were the highlight of our trip.

CONCLUSION

As we move forward into the twenty-first century, we must find ways to be in conversation across denominational and even religious boundaries while remaining in conversation with our own traditions and sharing those insights with people in other traditions, drawing upon the best spiritual wisdom of all of our traditions. The times require that new forms and models of ministry be interfaith. Only then can religion fulfill its purpose as an agent of healing and a host for that sense of transcendence that moves us out of ourselves to a new cooperative and respectful place.

NOTES

- 1 *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith: The Eye-Opening, Hope-Filled Friendship of a Pastor, a Rabbi and an Imam* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2009); *Religion Gone Astray: What We Found at the Heart of Interfaith* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2011); *Finding Peace Through Spiritual Practice: The Interfaith Amigos' Guide to Personal, Social and Environmental Healing* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2016).
- 2 Mackenzie, Falcon, and Rahman, *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith*, p. 126.