

**MY EXPERIENCE OF INTER-FAITH AS A HUMANIST**

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It has not been easy and nor should it be easy. Faith needs a leap of faith, and so does inter-faith : in fact, more than a few leaps of faith. Open-mindedness as well to listen, try to understand, put yourself in other people's shoes, compassion, trust, authenticity and self-knowledge. Not just knowledge, because we all think we have a lot of that.

I had been what is generally known as a 'humanist' for some years. Difficult word to use because it overlaps with secularist and agnostic, rationalist and free-thinker and atheist. All these bring baggage with them - perhaps tribal and polemic critiques of traditional religious beliefs and communities, perhaps hypocrisies about tolerance and social inclusion and parity of esteem, perhaps even acts of hatred and violence. At the same time, 'humanist' tries to mean other things - a view that this is the one life we have and so we should be responsible for each other, striving for tolerance and peace giving space for all forms of belief, including faith.

For all that, I had many friends for whom religious faith was central to their lives - Christians, Buddhists, many others. We talked robustly about why and what we believed, where there were differences and what this meant, even theological stuff like whether there was a God or divine being or whether matter had been created and how. We explored if you could be 'good without God', argued about the history of religion (was it the cause of war or peace?) and the power of prayer to heal, and came to understand a little better how being literal about scriptural and ideological claims (about the transcendent, about progress, about evidence) led to misunderstandings.

I found that exploring the boundaries - the no-man's-land - of faith and belief congenial. After all, I was a sociologist interested in religiosity and spirituality. Yet, however objective you are about faith and belief, there is a tipping point where you move from being an 'intellectual searcher' to a 'spiritual searcher'. This is where you know you engage with faith and belief experientially and emotionally, accept the limits and arrogance of empiricism, and come to share in the community of faith. My experience of inter-faith friendship has been the gateway to that shift. It's not all been 'in the mind' : inter-faith has been a process of sharing ritual, and of opening yourself to the metaphors and symbols that mean so much to people of faith.

As well as being a humanist, then, I have been an active member of local inter-faith dialogue and cooperation for some years. In every way, this has opened my eyes and my imagination. Not just realising connections between mainstream faiths and seeing how identity politics has tried to force them apart and how fundamentalism can create fear, seeing how the Buddhist pathway and the Stoic and the Taoist ways blend and subtly differ, realising how people with a firm faith nevertheless experience doubt and feel anger amid the compassion; not just all that, but being with inclusive and open-minded people who accept the dignity of difference. Perhaps the most tangible, and moving, forms of such 'being' come in sharing - meals, lighting a candle, sitting quietly and opening yourself to a family of friends you trust.

Far, then, from the grand narratives of politicized religious debate and media frenzy. Far, too, from the legalistic abstraction of concepts like 'equality' and 'identity politics' and 'society'. Far also from the stereotype of inter-faith as the clustering of the faith wagons in a hostile secular world full of post-modern pluralism. But, just in case this gives the false impression that inter-faith is cosily sentimental, far from it! It's really hard work - to detach yourself from hard-won beliefs dating from childhood within the silo of one faith, to accept radical contradictions between your faith and that of others (think of the divine Jesus Christ, think of the Trinity, think of the status of holy scripture), and to find suitable gracious words to use when someone alleges you are irrational to believe what you do.

Taking that leap of faith - faith in inter-faith - does not necessarily entail accepting the dogma or doctrine or creed. This can often come across as confrontational and dualistic - are you born again? Is this not the one true god? Is our faith right to define gender and caste the way it does? Surely we have a special covenant with God - God is on our side, not on yours. Are we right to wage a just war, look for an afterlife, believe sinners are punished? All these things have arisen throughout history and probably won't ever stop.

But it's not double-think to say that 'the inter-faith position' is right : it's not as if faith and belief are reduced to a bland common denominator, it does not need to dilute faith. Yet it does need real hard work - to open dialogue, to create real cooperative projects like sharing worship space and ritual, and to build compassion and tolerance. I've found that it also means a lot of personal change - after all, beliefs are highly personal things and we get emotional about them.

We don't 'negotiate' our faith in the sense that managers talk about negotiating employee pay - the process of 'getting to yes'. We often stick with our core beliefs, demonize other groups, see them monolithically as 'communities', rather than seeing society as 'community', making often hard demands on our feelings and tolerance and openness. For me inter-faith has been essential as a way of life and commitment. I really do believe in it. It's not easy: good things never are.