Finding Common Ground

June 14, 2009

Is America moving from an era of interfaith tolerance to an era of interfaith hospitality? That is the question that lies behind Gustav Niebuhr's book, *Beyond Tolerance*. Traveling around the country, and through many decades, Niebuhr is able to chronicle localized, independent coalitions and organizations that are and have been working to improve understanding between faith groups.

The fact that interfaith work is primarily local is supported by our experience in Tallahassee. In January, the Reform Temple, hosted a Jewish and Christian celebration of the life and work of Abraham Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr. – in honor of the birthday of Dr. King. We're all a part of the interfaith justice work of TEAM, which includes about 26 Christian congregations, one Jewish Temple, one Buddhist Society and one Unitarian Universalist congregation.

I attend meetings of the informal group of interfaith clergy, roughly comprising 20 liberal Christians, one Rabbi, one Cantor, one Imam, and one Unitarian Universalist minister. Last November, we were pleased to be able to breathe life into an old local practice when we took a new approach to the Thanksgiving Interfaith Service. Muslim, Buddhist, Christian and Jewish prayers were offered to an overflow crowd of 500 people at Temple Israel. It seemed especially fitting that this holiday, which has become associated with freedom from religious persecution, should be a time to celebrate the diversity that populates a Southern city.

We have had interfaith celebrations and interfaith meetings, but rarely do we have interfaith dialogue. The Thanksgiving Service did spark discussion amongst the interfaith clergy when one Christian pastor professed 'discomfort' with either being asked to join in a prayer from another tradition, or to listen to a prayer read by one who wasn't a practitioner of that tradition. Listening to the conversation I found myself at some remove from that concern. Perhaps it is because that almost nothing that is said at an interfaith service reflects my belief system, that I've taken a different attitude. For me, prayers are no more or no less particular in their theology that a reading from the Torah, the New Testament, the Bhagavad Gita or the Qu'ran. I have consciously learned, even in prayer, to find an opportunity to learn from a perspective not my own. Many Christian clergy, who rarely have to make such translations in this culture, find that someone is imposing a faith they don't hold. But, I entered the discussion to note that when someone closes out their prayer saying 'through Jesus Christ we pray,' I feel my right to a differing belief system has been discounted or ignored. We all left that discussion knowing that we need to develop a clearer, common understanding of what interfaith services can look like in Tallahassee, especially because we plan to host another service this year.

Interfaith cooperation is difficult. It is fraught with the memories of attacks by one faith community on another. The attacks aren't limited to the Inquisition and the Crusades, but, continue throughout American history. The first Quakers who came to the new world were hounded from city to city; jailed and treated as traitors. Catholics were welcome in limited areas as well, and when in the 1840's and 1850's Catholic

immigration swelled a nativist movement called on Protestants to stem the tide of change at hand. Niebuhr reminds us that, in Louisville, KY, the nativist movement led to attacks on Catholics and their property on a day that has come to be known as Bloody Monday. Roman Catholics have meted out their share of prejudice as well, carrying the anti-Jewish sentiment of the early church well into the twentieth century. Not so many years ago, Pope John Paul II said, "central Buddhist ideas about life and the world were plainly negative…He implied that he believed Buddhists were disengaged from society, not inclined by their faith to try to improve the world." The conservative Southern Baptist Convention in 1996 called a minister with the specific duty of converting Jews to Christianity. And, in the months and years following the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center by Muslims, some Christian leaders have launched verbal attacks on the faith of Islam. And, individual Christians (or people calling themselves Christian) have defaced buildings and attacked people presumed to be Muslim.

In this country of great diversity, some of the attackers have demonstrated both the limits of mob mentality and their lack of knowledge about Islam and other faiths. On more than one occasion, the people presumed to be Muslim have actually been Sikhs, from India, who happen to wear turbans as a part of their religious self-identity.

That brief recitation of religious animosities offers ample cause to wonder if any broad-based interfaith cooperation can exist. Yet, it seems that there is another tide rising in America as well. The tide of religious liberty lends itself to promoting, at the very least, tolerance of neighboring faiths. Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, and non-believers shall this fully settled continent, and proximity joins political theory in supporting a broad toleration of all. As George Washington wrote to the Jews who settled in Newport, RI – "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent gifts." In other words, the differences exist among equals who have equal rights to pursue their religious faith.

Even before the first President offered his perception of religious liberty, there were others who found in the very teachings of Christianity a broader view toward difference in belief. In 1657, hen Quakers were aggressive in their beliefs, and they were not welcome in most areas of the colonies, a decree was issued threatening punishment to all who gave Quakers room in their homes. A group in Flushing gathered a petition of protest. They wrote: "Therefore if any of these said persons come in love unto us, we cannot in conscience lay violent hands upon them, but give them free egresse and regresse unto our Town, and houses, as God shall persuade our consciences, for we are bounde by the law of God and man to doe good unto all men and evil to noe man."

Of course, Christian belief is not the only one which promotes a concept of hospitality which binds the believer to accept differences with love. John Dear, former director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, recalls a time when this became clear to him. At an inter-religious conference: "Muslims explained that Islam means peace, that Muslims are required to live at peace with others. Buddhists spoke of the way of compassion and respect toward all living beings. Jews spoke of the vision of Shalom, and Isaiah's call to

"beat swords into plowshares" and "study war no more." We Christians confessed that Jesus is nonviolent, that he called us to love our enemies, that he blessed peacemakers, that his last words before his martyrdom were "Put down the sword," and that his first words after his resurrection were "Peace be with you!"”

The call to peace and to be peacemakers gives religious traditions reasons to turn aside from violent rejection and suppression of differences, and to embrace the path that can lead to co-existence. This is the path that Gustav Niebuhr hopes will lead ‘beyond tolerance’ to a new relationship of equals. Niebuhr draws his understanding of the limitations of tolerance from the medical model. When a doctor asks, ‘how much can this patient *tolerate* medically,’ they mean how much can this patient *endure*. When groups tolerate each other, there may be a great deal of discomfort in the toleration, and sad potential for coming to the end of endurance. Thus, Niebuhr looks for acts of hospitality rather than the forebearance of toleration.

In my experience, interfaith cooperation sometimes begins and ends with the search for common ground. But, as Pope Jean Paul II’s reaction to Buddhism demonstrates, common ground is not always easy to find. Christians and Jews have long known that they are divided by the scriptures they hold in common. And while non-believers hold many values in common with believers, their very non-belief makes it difficult for some to imagine that any common ground exists. In addition, the dogged pursuit of common ground suggests that all religions and belief systems are somehow the same, even while common sense tells us this just isn’t true.

If we can’t simply go on a search for the things that are the ‘same’ in every belief system, it seems to me a helpful image for moving toward hospitality might be a labyrinth. Sometimes a labyrinth is confused with a maze, but the two are quite different. The goal in a maze is to enter at one point, outwit the confounding patterns and dead-ends to emerge victorious at the other end. The goal in a labyrinth is to follow the intricate pattern of turnings walking from the edge to the center, and to walk from the center, through the same number turns, to emerge where one began. Dr. Lauren Artress writes: “Based on the circle, the universal symbol for unity and wholeness, the labryrinth sparks the human imagination and introduces it to a kaleidoscopic patterning that builds a sense of relationship; one person to another, to another, to many people, to the creation of the whole.”

If the labyrinth as a whole can be thought to represent the ‘creation of the whole’ or the whole of the experience of non-belief and belief, so each turn represents different ways of being in a world filled with believers and non-believers living side by side. For instance, interfaith work often helps individuals to develop a deeper sense of their own identity, and sometimes it is necessary to withdraw from interfaith work to pursue that same sense of identity. I would suggest that ‘engagement’ and ‘withdrawl’ might both be important on the path to interfaith understanding, and might be met in the turnings on a single path to experiencing wholeness.

Another turn comes in the interplay of liberty and suppression. Liberty promotes the equality of viewpoints, no matter how different, while suppression suggests that one view is intrinsically better/more useful/holier than another. Yet, as individuals, we all engage in some suppression of ideas, especially when we are at liberty to pursue those ideas which are most meaningful to us. At a personal level, suppressing one idea in favor of another is the process of selection, or even discernment, and is qualified by the phrase 'for me.' As in the phrase, "Christianity is, for me, a path to self-understanding." You could substitute the words Atheism, Buddhism, or Judaism in that sentence without doing violence to any other belief system.

A third turning might be found in the juxtaposition of dialogue and monologue. Sometimes the only way to know what you believe is to write it all out from beginning to end, and sometimes the only way begin to understand what someone else believes is to engage a dialogue pointed toward understanding. Sometimes a group needs to just recite its own beliefs and values. For instance, when we focus on our Principles and the history of Unitarian and Universalist thinkers, we are engaging in a kind of monologue that helps us to understand Unitarian Universalist thinking better. And, sometimes a religious group needs to be in honest dialogue. In that dialogue, each group or person will speak their own truth, not to convince another of its supremacy or 'rightness.' The dialogues now underway, in cities across America between Christians and Jews, Jews and Muslims, Unitarian Universalists and Hindus, Catholics and Buddhists, Buddhists and Zoroastrians can lay the groundwork for interfaith hospitality arising in a clear understanding the differences that animate each perspective.

Another turning might lead from individualism to cooperation, especially for service and justice-seeking. Here in Tallahassee one congregation is known for its individualistic approach. They have their own service programs, their own food pantry, and their own methods. They are indeed lucky to be gifted in size to be able to stand alone in their good works. Yet, there is another model that is effective. The path of cooperation led a coalition of religious groups to found ECHO some years ago. Today, 29 congregations led their support to TEAM pursuing system-wide answers to human needs for justice. I won't claim for each participating TEAM congregation a perfect understanding of interfaith hospitality, but, I will claim that in that particular rubbing of elbows the possibility for engagement, liberty and dialogue, in addition to the cooperation that leads us to pursue a common goals for improving human lives.

Gustav Niebuhr went looking for signs of an interfaith hospitality that was large enough to be called a movement, and effective enough to be termed the inevitable future. He could not, in the end, say that he had found either; but, he was heartened by many local efforts to promote liberty, cooperation, dialogue, and meaningful engagement across belief lines. I am a realist. I live in the South, where some Christian groups prefer to focus on intolerance and conversion. We may be, for many years to come, limited to local efforts. Still, there is much that we can do with the Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Ba'hais and others in Tallahassee who share a common concern for freedom and understanding between people of widely differing beliefs.