

# The Challenge of Interfaith

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 September 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Jolyon Bromley

Pentecost 13A

**Matthew 7: 1-12; Interfaith Reading: “Every tree, every growing thing” by the Sufi poet, Rumi; Contemporary Reading: a reflection on the Svetasvatara Upanishad, from *Our Hearts Still Sing* by Peter Millar.**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

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Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that field,  
the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*  
doesn't make any sense.

Rumi

If we could just slip into that space, that metaphorical field where all distinctions fade in the oneness of the Divine, I wouldn't need to say anything today; we could just meditate in silence in complete harmony. Somehow, I think Rumi is describing an idealised state of consciousness that we can only aspire to.

I find Jelaluddin Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic's poetry inspiring but there's often an ambiguity, a tentativeness of expression, as though it's not possible to express the full depth of his feeling of Oneness.

Well, how is it that we are talking about these deeply philosophical things, this morning? Isn't it Spring? September? This is usually the Season of Creation, when we celebrate the beauty and wonder of the natural world, God's good creation. Perhaps today, we're celebrating the wonder and beauty of diversity.

This year the worship committee decided to explore an alternative theme – so it's aspects of Interfaith for the whole of September. I'm introducing the theme with - “The Challenge of Interfaith.”

I see two streams of the Interfaith movement that have gathered strength in recent times.

One stream is the search for spiritual connection not tied to a particular religion. You know the people who say *"I'm spiritual but not religious."* These people (who are possibly a majority in our culture today) are attracted to the Interfaith Service initiated here by Stephanie Dowrick over 11 years ago. She described it as *"Spirituality without borders"*. It's largely a personal exploration.

The other stream is about Interfaith dialogue – where leaders and people from different faiths get together to develop greater understanding and mutual respect. This is driven by the desire to improve social harmony in increasingly multi-faith, multi-cultural societies.

These are both world-wide phenomena – not just in Australia!

Recently I attended a lunch-time lecture with Barbara Dutton, organized by Affinity, Intercultural Foundation – a Turkish Islamic group who follow the teaching of Fetullah Gulen – a moderate Islamic scholar who strongly advocates for Interfaith dialogue and accepts Sufism as the inner dimension of Islam. (In many places, Sufism is repressed and persecuted.) He teaches a duty of service to the common good of the community and nation, including non-Muslims all over the world.

His name is probably familiar to you as the leader accused of facilitating the recent coup attempt in Turkey. It's been a wonderful excuse for the conservative Islamic prime minister to arrest thousands of Gulen supporters in an attempt to destroy his influence.

In this recent lecture, Gulen was quoted as saying something about Interfaith dialogue that really impressed me; *"we need to acknowledge our differences – but see through the differences to the good."* This can give us a whole new way of operating.

Of course the 2 streams of Interfaith, the personal and the social interact – very notably in the life and work of one of the great spiritual leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - Mahatma Gandhi. He laid the foundation for non-violent action and has inspired leaders of protest movements all over the world. In standing up to injustice and the power of the British Raj he employed what he called *"satyagraha"* - soul force.

In this strongly held value of *"non-violence"*, Gandhi was deeply influenced by the teachings of Jesus. From the age of 19 he said he read the Bhagavad Gita and the New Testament side by side. He had time during long periods of imprisonment to study the Christian scriptures and wrote detailed commentaries on them.

Bill Emilson, a member of this congregation for many years read all the volumes of commentaries and published an edited version of selections called *"Gandhi's Bible"*.

Gandhi was regarded as such an authority on the Christian Scriptures, particularly on the Gospels, that he was invited to lecture on the Bible at a tertiary institution in his home state of Gujarat. An invitation which he accepted. This gave his Hindu detractors the opportunity to call him *"a Christian in secret."*

On 2 Sept 1926 he responded in an article - *"I regard my study of and reverence for the Bible, the Quran and other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my claim to be a staunch Hindu... They have broadened my view of life."*

Although he respected all scriptures he subjected them to be tested by the twin principles of reason and non-violence. Nothing should be accepted as the word of God unless it could stand up to the test of these 2 principles.

Following in Gandhi's footsteps in Interfaith dialogue today we need to consider texts and religious/cultural practices in the light of our own strongly held values.

I want to move our discussion now, out of the broad realm of theorizing to my own experience of challenge, in 3 situations.

When I went to India with Oxfam to study development projects, one free afternoon I was wandering around the streets of Pune when I came upon a small temple – it was just a corrugated iron roof covering an open space with one step up to a tiled floor. There was a bell hanging near the front step which people rang as they entered. It was such a simple space (I don't even remember any idol) but made holy, sacred by the people's devotion, their overwhelming sense of reverence.

It strikes me that this is a challenge to us – to find that sense of reverence, devotion, and even, Peter Millar says, adoration for the holy one, the source of life, love and goodness.

This is difficult in our materialistic culture but without it – without a sense of reverence - we can become intellectually arrogant, self-centred, with an over-blown sense of our own importance. A sense of reverence is a kind of reality-check about where we fit into the wider scheme of things.

The second experience happened at a meeting of the Synod Relations With Other Faiths Committee. We were planning the first Iftar dinner, as a way of reaching out to the Muslim community during Ramadan. After a day of fasting the evening meal (the Iftar dinner) becomes a celebratory experience and they love to share it. As we sat around the table thinking about how we could expand our event to include others to make it a real Interfaith occasion – we started seeing difficulties – how would we cater for it? We'd need Halal for Muslims, kosher for Jews, no beef for Hindus, vegetarian for Buddhists. We were thinking how all these dietary restrictions made things so difficult, when a young woman on the committee said something quite surprising!

She said – *“I think we have lost something without any restrictions. We've lost a sense of discipline.”* And that is another challenge – discipline in spiritual practice.

One of the things I love about the Uniting Church is its openness and freedom. There are virtually no enforced obligations, religious demands like fasting; no one pressures you to attend services. It's all up to you! We are free to develop our own spiritual practice. There may be suggestions, opportunities but no demands – it's about our own individual conscience. In some ways its religion made easy and there's a danger of superficiality. I know that regular practice builds up a kind of spiritual energy that helps you deal with what life throws at you.

Discussing the rigours of fasting through the 40 days of Ramadan with people at the Iftar dinner, rather than being seen as a terrible burden, they were enthusiastic about it; they lit up – it's such a strengthening experience, an exercise of will, that gives them a spiritual high!

The third experience of interfaith challenge was at one of the anti-Adani actions at the Commonwealth Bank Headquarters, aimed at pressuring the bank not to fund the Adani mine in Queensland.

Geoff Maddox and Bill Thomas from this congregation were part of the group that infiltrated the building, unfurled a banner and set themselves up to stay in the foyer.

Outside, Margaret, Stephen and Vivien Langford and I held up “Don't Fund Adani” placards, linking up with other Christian groups and a very well organised group of Buddhists – who laid out their mats to meditate and chant.

We joined in their “*Om mane padme hum*” (the jewel in the lotus) and they enthusiastically joined in our Taize chant “*Ubi caritas et amor, ubi caritas deus ibi est*” (Where charity and love are found, God is there).

In this moment of uniting our different practices in a common cause – I experienced “satyagraha” a very tangible soul force.

So to conclude, the challenge of Interfaith is to see through the differences to the good in others; to find the deep, devotional connection with the source; to strengthen and develop that connection through disciplined spiritual practice; and to work together bringing “soul force” into play to transform the world.