

In This Age of Globalization No Religion Can Remain in Their Religious Enclave

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I want to begin with a Talmudic story. In the Jewish Talmud, the compendium of the law... there are two famous rabbis. One was Rabbi Hillel and the other was Rabbi Shammai. The story in the Talmud is that a convert, an atheist or a pagan (we're not certain) comes to Rabbi Shammai who was a great scholar at the time of Jesus or maybe a hundred years later, and says to Rabbi Shammai "I want to become Jewish, but you'll have to tell me all about Judaism standing on one foot." Shammai is furious and says, "Get out of here!" Rabbi Shammai rejects the possible convert and throws him out.

He goes to the next school, the school of Rabbi Hillel, and he says, "Listen, Rabbi Hillel, Shammai just kicked me out, but let me ask you: Can you tell me all about Judaism standing on one foot. If so, I will convert." Hillel says, "For sure, I'll tell you

while you're standing on one foot." "Well, what is it?" Shammai asks. Rabbi Hillel says, "What is hateful to you, do not do to someone else. All the rest is commentary." This explained a difference between these two schools. There's another difference. There's a famous argument in the Talmud about weddings. If you go to a wedding and you see a bride, what do you say about the bride? Shammai said you have to say the bride is beautiful if she is beautiful. If she's not that beautiful, say she's not very good looking. Hillel said, No, all brides are beautiful. So, the Rabbis in the school of Shammai came and said, "Hillel, how can you say that? You're lying." But Hillel said, "For the sake of peace and making people feel good. You can tell white lies." And this is encapsulated in law. The differences between the schools were great. Yet they respected each other. In general, the school of Shammai was deeper, more learned, actually more correct in a way, but the Talmudic view is that whenever there is a dispute, except for very few cases, we always follow the school of Hillel. Why do you think that is?

Consider others' views

Even though they [the two rabbis] disagreed with each other, the two groups' followers married each other, and they ate together with each other. They respected each other, though they were fierce religious competitors. It always fascinated me: Why was the school of Hillel so successful against the greater intellectual wisdom and skill of the Shammai school? The Talmud asks this question as well.

One of the things that I think explains this is that the school of Hillel studied and listened carefully to the positions of the Shammai school. On the other hand the Shammai school was dismissive, they didn't care what Hillel said; they had their own argument. The Talmud explains that listening and studying an intellectual adversary brings wisdom and enhances one's own point of view.

And therefore, the Talmud says, [He says it in Hebrew] in English, "Both the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel are correct." And there is the question, Are they both correct? Yes, they are both correct, but we'll follow the school of Hillel because they listened to the other point of view. So, in general, Jewish law follows the Hillel point of view.

Why am I bringing this up? Firstly, I love this story, but what's more important is that listening and studying the views, 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 between people or groups with whom we may have disagreements, even serious and existential disagreements. So, I think the school of Hillel and Shammai gives us a template of how we can go about having religious dialogue.

The age of globalization

Frank Kaufmann, our wonderful speaker, my dear friend, and I have been involved in interfaith meetings and international conferences for more than several decades. Mainly through the Inter-religious Federation for World Peace, but even before that, in the old days, I was invited by such groups as New Era, and the Council of World Religions, which were organized and planned by Dr. Frank Kaufmann.

These meetings turned out to be wonderful meeting places for the world's religious leaders and for scholars and academicians studying religions and the serious challenges facing religious communities in the age of globalization. The leadership of the IRFWP, the Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace, understood that as the twentieth century waned, the old era of religious separatism, in which each religious community was situated in its own geographical, social space, with adherents living solely together with their co-religionists, all sharing a religious culture and sensibility, was now over.

We live in a new global world. In this age of globalization, international migration, global social media, and world travel, no religion can remain ensconced in their religious enclave. In this new reality, what was in the past the outsiders, the religious opposition, the heretics, even the enemy, were now our local supermarket clerks, our mailmen, our physicians, teammates, bankers or housekeepers. We no longer were religiously separated. We met "the other" at the ball field when our kids were playing soccer or when we went to the baker or to the butcher, as it were. This new reality of living together in a pluralistic world required a reorientation, a new way of religious commitment and faith. It necessitated a willingness to view other religious believers' faith commitment -- even that of those with whom we had existential differences -- as valid, as genuine, even though it may not accord with our own deeply held religious convictions.

Early meetings

Frank organized the meetings precisely to meet these goals. Each meeting was planned to have people from the world's established religions and well-known religions as well as representatives from new religious movements, including communities that were unpopular at that time and even stigmatized by the popular media, so-called cults.

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 each other's humanity, the commonalities, 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 with the understanding, as Martin Buber put it, of meeting the other as a "thou," willing to hear and recognize the humanity of the other [I-thou (We have something in common.) as opposed to I-it] to recognize, as Jewish theology puts it, the divine image in each person, to value their beliefs and validity and their many different religious views.

How is this accomplished? Number one, there was an attitude of dignity. All the sponsoring organizations had volunteers warmly welcoming the participants. There were special foods for the different communities -- vegetarian, even food without eggs -- so that every need was met. This was not easily achieved; there were many mishaps.

Please know that there were people attending these early conferences who had never 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 had they ever interacted, with people who were of a different belief. And they all were coming feeling antagonistic or even hostile to other beliefs. Some people were frightened, deeply suspicious, ambivalent about the whole process as if to say, What have I gotten into? Still, in my view, the sense of dignity and respect, which was the governing norm, helped ease the many possible conflicts and difficulties.

An atmosphere in which change occurred

I want to give you one example of something that occurred. At one meeting in Harrison, Canada, I was sitting at a table with three Muslim scholars. I won't mention their names, but Frank and Tyler [Hendricks] will know. Forgive me. One of the scholars was the head of the Muslim College in London, a scion of the Prophet, from a very distinguished family. Another was a relatively young convert to Islam, raised Catholic but something of a scholar and a pious Muslim. The third was an old Sheik from Syria.

We all sat together. The waiter came around and asked, "What would you like to have? We have beef, chicken or salad." I, being an Orthodox Jew, said "I'll take the salad," not wanting to eat unkosher food. The Sheik was asked through an assistant and said, "I'll take the chicken. It's a Christian country, and it's halal." The head of the Muslim college said, "I'm going to do like the Sheik." They asked the young Catholic convert, and he said, "I'll take the salad, I don't trust people. What if it is not real halal? I'm not allowed to do it." The old Sheik and the principle of the Muslim college spoke, "Listen, you can. We have a lot of stories of the Prophet that show this is permitted." He said, "No." and they said, "Let's listen to the young comrade. And all four of us had a salad." By that, I mean there was dialogue. There was listening that took place.

The second important ingredient was the almost unparalleled freedom of expression and a refusal to demand conformity and political correctness. This was made possible by the absence of any official representatives. Please remember, any number of participants had deeply held views on the nature of family. So there were many people who had very strong views, but on the other hand, through the

dialogue, things could happen.

I remember one well-known American feminist scholar who explained to me at the coffee break that she learned much from the Middle Eastern imam about the importance of authority and tradition in family life in Islam, though it challenged her commitment to personal freedom, individualism and her view of gender equality. I can also recall, personally, what remains for me and I think for many Western people from Western traditions, shocking depictions, even enactments of tribal and animistic rites. Still, I remain thankful to the organizations and to Frank for giving me the opportunity to gain greater insight into the human search for transcendent reality. I don't want to go on much longer. I have much more to say. I usually speak between an hour or fifty minutes, but I want to just end.

Recognize the validity of other's views

What can we learn from dialogue? I'll leave you with this. Christian Schendal was a professor at Harvard University, who worked at the Center for the Study of World Religions. When they asked him about dialogue, he said the best thing that could happen, and I love this term, is "holy envy." Holy envy! For example, when I heard Christians speaking about Christ, and I'm not a Christian, I'm not a believer in Christianity, I had envy. I said, "Who could not love a religion when God took human form and died for me?" I was envious. When I see Unificationists, who welcome everybody, even those who disagree and provide them such dignity and love, I'm envious of such a religion that provides such deep feelings for the other. I can't marshal that, so I'm envious.

When I visited my Muslim colleagues, and I saw the *Shura* [a process of "consultation" which is what the word means in Arabic] I saw that they make lines during their prayer and everyone bows. I said, "What a brotherhood! How beautiful!" And I'm not Muslim. So my last words are, that through dialog, we need not agree. There are differences. But the word I like to use is "validity." You can disagree, but [you accept] it is valid for the other person.

But just one other minute. [Laughter] This seems to be a habit! In the Jewish tradition, the ideal is -- and this is based on the teachings of Moses Maimonides, the great medieval philosopher -- Maimonides argued in his book *The Guide for the Perplexed*, which is actually written in Arabic -- he argued that it is God's will that we have different religious communities. That God desires different paths. They are all valid. But they are different. Maimonides argued that even in the times of Messianic transformation of the universe, God will want us to meet him with our different rituals, our different garb, perhaps, our different beliefs, uniting in the belief in the destiny of humanity to find the Divine amongst ourselves. Thank you very much.