

Interfaith and the Shadows of Religion

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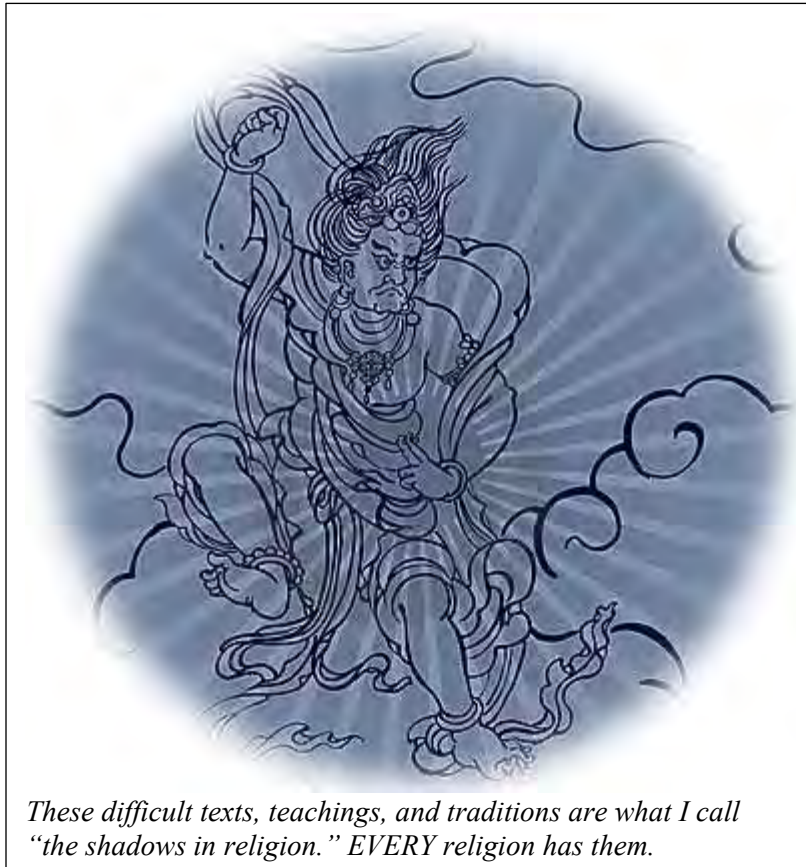
PART I

The early, cautious, little steps into interfaith encounter in our time emerged while imperial, supersessionist, conversionary, and Balkanized impulses and mentalities still dominated religious assumptions in major world religions. Some religions were more extreme or overt in these attitudes and postures, but in fact all major world religions could be so defined either at deep levels, or at significant sectors of its most powerful leadership. It also should be noted that even though much of this darkness has receded due to recent decades of interfaith effort (and probably due to the growing secularization of modern people), even so, many established religions retain some base elements of these ways, at deep and highly established levels.

Because early interfaith was (and in most cases still is) basically a conversation in polite company, cautious, timid, afraid to offend, polite, brittle, not open, easy or intimate, a tremendous amount of what really needs to be discussed still goes unsaid, unspoken. The religions presenting themselves are tirelessly (or tiringly) invested in presenting only their good side, or worse a side so good that it is in fact nowhere to be found. And the dialogue partners smile, nod their heads and bend over backwards to be more affirmative of the partner's religion than almost any practitioner or believer inside that tradition really is.

There are a number of important aspects of these unspoken ground rules in interfaith that are positive, good, and helpful. Over the last 30 or 40 years such conversations have provided platforms for people to talk to one another, and come to have loving and caring relationships with people from other faiths, relationships that would simply be unheard of just a very short while ago in our modern history.

But despite the good and positive growth and deeper understanding that has arisen in these 1000s of polite and cautious interfaith environments, there remains unvisited much of the very most needed conversation that should happen interreligiously. Sure it's ok to year after year sit through "That's lovely. I love chapattis. The embroidery on your headscarves is so beautiful. Yes we too could benefit from your deep respect for and understanding of silence." But what about, "Didn't some countries exterminate innocents in the name of Christ?" "Doesn't your religion teach that if land ever was yours, then it must forever be yours, at any cost, sooner or later?" And so on and so forth.



These difficult texts, teachings, and traditions are what I call "the shadows in religion." EVERY religion has them.

This is not to say these shadows are ignored. Enlightened thinkers within each tradition do take such matters seriously. Great thought and investment goes into finding ways beyond the shadows so that God's sweet, healing light can shine through. BUT, so far these efforts have not unfolded in shared inquiry. These conversations are not yet part of interfaith encounter, even after all these decades. To me, it would be great to hear, "Hello you Buddhist, you Jain, you Christian. You know, we have a few passages in our scriptures that SO tend to support violence that it's killing us to try to find the way around this. Listen, here are some of these scriptures. Sound pretty bad huh? Do you have any ideas about how we can support the constructive truth implied in these passages, while eroding their great power to serve the perverse ends of violent people?"

Will interfaith talk reach this level? It seems increasingly pressing that it must, and must do so sooner than later.