

“In essentials, **unity**, in non-**essentials**, liberty and, in all things, charity.”

Whether the above quote came from John Wesley or Augustine (there are disputes!), the sentiment is appropriate for National Inter-faith Week, which this year runs from 13-20 November. Its aims are to:

- Strengthen good inter-faith relations at all levels
- Increase awareness of the different and distinct faith communities in the UK, in particular celebrating and building on the contribution which their members make to their neighbourhoods and to wider society
- Increase understanding between people of religious and non-religious beliefs.

I encourage you to look for opportunities near you to explore other faith traditions as well as share something of your faith with others. You can find more information at <https://www.interfaithweek.org>.

I've always enjoyed my encounters with National Inter-faith Week, recognising the commonalities and spirit of good will that bubbles over in such events. I reminded again that good inter-faith dialogue often begins in reciprocal appreciation of shared values. That's the place to start, but it's not the place to grow.

The leader of one inter-faith group I belonged to always insisted we concentrate on the things we had in common. He got very anxious if someone suggested we might disagree on something. That group was very 'nice,' but it rarely afforded the opportunity to examine our views and grow through the discussion. Over the years, I've realised I learn the most when space is provided for exploring how and why we disagree.

The comment I often hear from adults regarding inter-faith is: “Aren't all religions alike? I mean, they all teach about loving God and each other...” Yes, nearly all faith traditions have a 'Golden Rule' about treating each other with care and respect, and most observe beliefs and practices intended to strengthen individuals' spiritual growth and communal identity. Virtually all have rituals to mark significant passages such as birth and death, coming of age, and marriage, rituals that connect the individuals with the community. Our religions have seasonal celebrations that connect us with the world around us; we have traditions that link us with our past and our future. We have belief patterns that give us guidance in how we are to live with God and each other. Some beliefs have been received as divine inspiration, others as the result of human experience.

Many human experiences are indeed shared across our various cultures; other understandings grow out of unique circumstances. As children we all grow up learning certain patterns for how to do things from our parents and other family members. Then comes the time when we visit another's home, or even stay overnight. In the morning, we realise that getting out of bed, getting washed and dressed, combing hair, brushing teeth, and eating breakfast still happen, but perhaps in a different order than we're used to. Though we might have different ways of doing things, we get the 'essential' things done.

But what is 'essential'? That would depend on what one considers the essential 'human problem,' and on that, many religions disagree. For Christians and Jews, the essential 'human problem' is sin: we humans were created 'good' according to God's will, but we continually try to go our own way instead of God's way. We call that 'sin.' To return to our original goodness, we must recognise and repent of our sin. We do so in the recognition that God will forgive our sin if we truly repent. Our Christian community liturgies also name Jesus as the

one who, through his life, death, and resurrection, has the power to take away our sin. Our grateful response to that forgiveness is an eagerness to be more like God, to do good.

The concept of 'sin' makes little sense to a Hindu, for whom *moksha* is the aim of a good life, *Moksha* is the spiritual maturity which leads one beyond the endless cycle of human life and death (i. e., reincarnation) and into full communion with the divine, released from earthly trials. Doing good can lead to *moksha* and being reborn into a higher state of humanness – closer to the divine – in the next life. Conversely, *karma* dictates that the evil (sin?) one does in the current life has effects in the future life.

The Buddha wasn't as interested in avoiding the cycle of constant rebirth as he was in eliminating human suffering. He studied and practiced various techniques for spiritual enlightenment and finally discovered an ideal alignment of body, mind, and spirit to reach the blissful state of *nirvana*. In a sense, he wasn't eliminating suffering but finding ways to rise above it.

Zoroastrianism, which developed alongside Hinduism and Judaism in the pre-Christian era, also has a concept of 'goodness' in that one must adhere to 'good thoughts, good words, good actions' to become spiritually mature. For a Zoroastrian, though, the impact of doing/being 'good' is not just about an individual's growth but about every good thought/word/action contributing to an overall balance of the ultimate cosmic struggle between good and evil.

These attempts to name and address the essential 'human problem' show similarities but also differences. Becoming aware of the diversity allows me to re-examine my own beliefs. Do I do good in gratitude, as a duty, to eliminate suffering, or to affect the cosmic balance? Interfaith dialogue helps me understand my own beliefs better, even as I learn to treat my neighbour's beliefs with more compassion.

■ Bonni-Belle Pickard