

Interfaith 2

Recently I took part in a House Group with friends from church. We meet twice a month and usually study a book of the Bible, but right now we're approaching the end of a different study: a book by Rowan Williams – 'Being Disciples'. In his final chapter he raises the issue of 'spirituality', which is sometimes described in terms such as "I'm spiritual but not religious". My fellow group members understandably approach this from another angle. Spirituality is expressed through the beliefs and practices of a particular religious tradition – in this case, Christianity.

In writing this piece I'm careful (at least, I hope I'm careful) to avoid disparaging people who pursue that 'spiritual but not religious' path to illumination, self-transcendence, or what whatever inner personal goal they are pursuing. Who am I to offer such advice to anyone?

But our conversation raised a question. For adherents of of a religious tradition, spirituality is embodied in and expressed through the beliefs and practices of their particular religious tradition, just as is the case with my (Christian) friends of the House Group. How does this 'particularity' mesh with the impulses towards 'commonality' that we have seen in some places recently?

I feel I need to offer a word of caution. It won't do to approach interfaith by attempting a side-by-side comparison of your religious tradition with someone else's. Compare and contrast, tick-box-by-tick-box, will open no windows of understanding.

I have often noticed that religious traditions are strongly resistant to any attempt to understand them 'from the outside looking in'. A religious tradition can be truly understood only from the inside, otherwise its internal coherence is lost. Such an approach can lead to the assumption that religion X is a defective variant of religion Y.

This is certainly the case with Christianity and with Islam. Christians may talk of a 'personal relationship with Jesus' without which the whole picture is baffling. Islam (the very word means 'submission') cannot be understood fully by discussing matters theologically or philosophically, trying to tease out (for example) exactly what Islam means by 'no god but God' alongside the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The likely destination of such a journey is misunderstanding and confusion, and perhaps even resentment. Without submission the message of Islam will remain forever blurred and hazy. And the same goes for Christianity: the unity of the church seems to be found in the idea of a three-in-one God. Take the pieces apart and the whole no longer makes much sense. I suspect, though, we Christians might prefer to use a word such as 'commit' rather than 'submit'.

The fundamental core of Islam states that there is no god but Allah, and Islam is incomprehensible without submission.

Christianity too cannot be understood solely as a cerebral exercise. (John Wesley wrote 'faith is not a train of ideas in the head; it is a transformation of the heart'. Another spiritual writer of many centuries ago reminded us that we can know God only by love, by being lost in God. My fellow Christians might find the word 'commit' expresses it better than 'submit'.

If, then, these great faith traditions teach us that it is impossible to understand them from the outside, what does this say about the possibility of mutually respectful dialogue? Clearly individual pilgrims cannot simultaneously submit to Islam and commit to Christ. What can they expect to learn from one another?

Here is a comment from a Muslim.

The Muslim submits and commits to that which Jesus submitted to and committed to; an ever present Single Unity. Jesus is one of the highest manifestations of the attributes of that Unity. The best thing we can agree on is that we worship God and reject false gods (including the idols of wealth, power, greed, malice, envy etc), that we are committed to serving His creation and that we benefit from our awareness of His Presence.

With regard to understanding from the outside, one cannot understand the taste of honey until one actually tastes it. That's quite well understood. The point being made is that practice brings experience. It is not an intellectual knowledge we are concerned with but an experiential knowledge which then shapes our outlook, behaviour and action. To submit, in fact, implies commitment and vice versa.

In his great epic *The Lord of the Rings* JRR Tolkien included a number of hobbit folk songs. One of these included the line: *the road goes ever on and on*. Exactly!