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**Facing the Challenge:
Toward a Credible and Authentic Inter-Faith Dialogue**

by
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The deeper we step into the 21st century, the clearer it becomes that we must take seriously the reality and significance of the world’s great spiritual traditions if we are to survive as a species, let alone become a healthy family. We are challenged with the urgent need to discover creative ways for relating with each other in open, honest and respectful relationships. Yet we seem increasingly caught in a complex dialectic of distrust and resentment that allows little room for dialogue, and threatens to condemn us to a perpetual spiral of division and conflict. A headline in *The Economist* earlier this year captured not only the difficulties of the current moment but the dynamic that has characterized much of the 1,300 year relationship between the Islamic world and the Christian and Humanist traditions of the West: “Mutual Incomprehension, Mutual Outrage”.

I have been asked to reflect on the key challenges we face if we are to engage in inter-faith dialogue in a credible and authentic manner. In considering the future, I found it was necessary first to remember some moments in my own experience that inform and guide my own perspective on the challenges that lie ahead.

Memoir #1

It is 1978, and I am a young graduate student of ethics at McGill University. The Khomeni revolution is in full flood in Iran, and a resurgent, radical and assertive Islam is taking its defiant place on the world’s stage. It has also seized the imaginations of students at McGill’s prestigious Institute of Islamic Studies, where classrooms have become turbulent battle-grounds of argument and accusation between Sunnis and Shi’ites. I have been assigned to deliver the lectures on Islam for the Institute’s introductory under-graduate course in comparative religion.

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My supervisor explained her theory: because I come from a Christian background, both sides should be able to have greater confidence in the fairness and objectivity of my presentation of the history, structure and meaning of their faith. But it is one thing to offer an academic analysis and assessment of another religion to one's colleagues, and something else entirely to do so with a group composed of devoted members of the main rival factions of that religion. I learned that one of the key challenges of inter-faith dialogue – building a relationship of trust – is directly related to the ability to demonstrate solid understanding and sincere respect.

Memoir #2

It is 1995, and I have co-authored a book on human rights in Sudan called *The Tears of Orphans*. Among other things, it appealed to the government to follow other Muslim countries in adopting alternative interpretations of Islamic law that would prohibit punishments such as flogging and amputation, practices that are considered torture under international law. I had proposed holding meetings with the government to discuss our concerns and assist with possible reforms; the government put out a public statement agreeing to the visit, and invited me to come to Geneva first to discuss arrangements.

At the embassy in Geneva I sat down with the Minister of Justice, who promptly informed me the authorities had labeled me "an enemy of Islam" for advocating deviation from Shari'ah law, and that a public burning of my book was scheduled to take place in Khartoum the next day. His statement was partly a threat, and partly a kindness; the Minister was advising that if I came to Khartoum they would have to treat me accordingly! The visit did not proceed, and the hope of any constructive dialogue – along with the opportunity to improve the lives of countless people facing yet another decade of abuse and war – went up in smoke. I learned that effective inter-faith dialogue is more than a matter of polite conversation about ideas, but that critical issues of life and death are at stake involving many people beyond the class-room or conference hall.

Memoir #3

It is 1998, and the glimmer of hope inspired by the Oslo Accords is wearing thin in Israel and Palestine. Ancient unresolved grievances and grinding new frustrations are generating tensions that will, before long, erupt in the Second Intifada. I have just finished delivering a set of lectures on "The Role of Imams in Promoting Human Rights" at the An-Najah National University in Nablus in the West Bank, and I am feeling quite pleased with myself and how things went. I am going on to Nazareth, one of the main Palestinian towns in northern Israel, to chair a public hearing on local human rights concerns.

Hundreds of people crammed into the hall in Nazareth, many of them armed with file folders and photographs documenting indignities and atrocities suffered by their families and neighbours. The grievances often extended back years, even decades, but unrecognized and unresolved they persisted as powerful presences in the people's lives. They came to be heard, and the room seethed with pent up pain and anger. From the outset, the witnesses screamed their testimony. Soon no one had patience to await their

turn at the microphone and countless people stood throughout the room shouting of their suffering. It took me a while to realize that it was not anger directed at me, but just anger that needed to be heard by someone in “authority”. Still, it was a tough burden to bear, and after a couple of hours I closed the session, leaving raw and exhausted. I learned that inter-faith dialogue required developing certain critical skills: the ability to listen carefully, to maintain a commitment to openness and honesty in the face of serious disagreements and deep suffering, to know one’s own limits and what to take responsibility for personally – and what not.

Memoir #4

It is 2004, and I am in Yemen to chair an international conference of judges, lawyers, and other legal experts to address the issue of the thousands of people being held under anti-terror laws at Guantanamo. We are in Yemen because it is the only country in the region that has agreed to grant entry visas to all of the nationalities involved. Sadly, petty rivalries and narrow ideologies continue to prevent the people who need to be part of creating solutions to the world’s problems from even speaking with each other.

The US government had determined that suspected terrorist prisoners would not be entitled to the safeguards provided by either international or domestic law. Officials declared that the purpose of the detention was vengeance and punishment, rather than truth and justice. Deciding that certain people do not have fundamental “rights”, the US government essentially determined that certain people are not entitled to be considered “human” – a message that many people throughout the Islamic world felt was directed at them as well. Ordinary folk on the streets and in the market-place made it clear that they are less and less inclined to make any distinction between individual citizens and the policies of our governments. They bitterly pointed out that if we don’t know what is happening to them, it must be either because we are determined not to know, or because we simply don’t care. I learned that if we – on both sides – are to take inter-faith dialogue seriously, we cannot pretend to not be responsible for the actions of our leaders and others who claim to represent us if we remain ignorant or silent about the abuses they commit on our behalf.

Memoir #5

It is 2005, and I am doing some human rights work in the war-ravaged area along the Burundi-Congo border. More than four million people have been killed in this country during the past decade of civil war, and of course the vast majority of them have been poor, innocent women and children. Perhaps the only thing more shocking has been the scant attention paid to this tragedy by the world’s governments and media.

A measure of peace has come to this region through the presence of more than 17,000 UN peace-keepers. As I pass along the road, people assume I must be one of them. They wave from their houses and call out to me: “Hey, Pakistani, bienvenue! Welcome!” Virtually all of the UN peace-keeping forces in the Congo are Muslims – in fact, almost one-third of the peace-keepers deployed in the fifteen current UN operations around the

world are from the two largest contributors to the program: Bangladesh and Pakistan. Each of these relatively poor Islamic states contributes more soldiers to UN peace-keeping operations than all 26 NATO countries combined! It may not conform to our notion of how things are in the world, but if you are a refugee fleeing a war in Africa and looking for protection, your image of a UN peace-keeper is likely to be of a Muslim from South Asia, and almost certainly not of a Canadian (there are currently only 11 Canadian soldiers serving in UN operations). Looking around as another ragged militia unit of one of the warlords marched threateningly down the main street of Uvira, I realized that the Pakistanis were protecting me as well! I learned that one of the key challenges of inter-faith dialogue is being open to the possibility that how we perceive each other – indeed, who we actually are – may be changed and transformed in the course of our relationship.

Emergent Challenge #1

Much of our understanding of other faiths is mediated through perspectives drawn from within our own culture and tradition. Finding ways to step outside this box can be one of the most important and difficult obstacles to creating an appropriate ground for dialogue. One way to begin is by reading books that present a critical analysis of one's own faith written from outside your cultural tradition, or that focus on the relationship between the two religious cultures. When inviting someone from another faith tradition to share about their religion with your group, ask to hold the meeting in their place of gathering and worship.

Emergent Challenge #2

Inter-faith dialogue has traditionally been carried out as a luxury or marginal exercise in most faith communities – often as a rather formal and lofty preserve for experts and leaders. Sometimes it is seen as something that should be engaged in for the benefit of the others group, or for the general good of the general community. Inter-faith dialogue needs to be recognized as a core function at the very heart of the life and work of faith communities, intrinsic to the shaping of our own identity not just of shaping our relationship with the other. Equipping members of one's faith community to engage in authentic dialogue should be seen as an integral part of their spiritual development, an essential ingredient in their own process of personal transformation.

Emergent Challenge #3

Dialogue is not about being nice, or pretending that we are all the same. It requires that we undertake to honestly recognize our real differences, to relate to each other constructively even when we are in opposition, and to stand in solidarity with each other when one of us is attacked. It also means coming to terms with a deeper understanding of our own faith tradition, and undertaking to come clean on the tough parts and incongruities of our own religion if we ask other to do so about theirs.

Emergent Challenge #4

Although they may not reflect the beliefs or behaviours of most people in their communities, extremist or fundamentalist elements have come to assume a pre-eminent role as leaders or representatives for many of the world religions during the past decade, at least in the eyes of the media and popular culture. This is the case for both Christianity and Islam. These extremist forces tend to oppose dialogue and erect obstacles to understanding and, too often, they have combined with virulent nationalist or other ideological sentiments, resulting in repression and violence. Faith communities must come to terms with the status of these elements in defining the character of their religions in the public view by either charting a clear alternative identity, or by challenging the legitimacy of the extremists, or both.

Emergent Challenge #5

Increasingly, those who oppose dialogue also seek to portray the values of pluralism and multiculturalism as a costly and unsustainable failure, and tend to promote a social vision based on a notion of the “parallel development” of different religious and ethnic communities. People who are committed to practicing credible and authentic inter-faith dialogue must begin to develop a shared agenda that is not based solely on traditional issues of religious forms or theological questions, but one that is primarily shaped by the common critical concerns facing our communities – human rights, conflict and reconciliation, environmental sustainability. We should recognize, encourage and celebrate sincere and thoughtful efforts, however small or local, to create opportunities for young people to engage with these realities, and to experiment with creating new futures.

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