INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS FRIENDSHIP

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Transformation of the Religious Map of the USA

Today, a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim will find a place of worship/meditation in almost every major city.
The challenge of our interreligious context is one of commitment with openness to our neighbors of other faiths.
New religious landscape presents us with challenges as well as opportunities for enrichment.
Friendship is highly valued in the Hindu tradition.

Bhagavadgita (12:13) describes the ideal human being as a friend to all.
FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF FRIENDSHIP

- Shared Identity
- Ethical Responsibilities
- Trust
- Generosity
“I didn’t quite know how much you had learnt to love me till that morning when you put your hand on my shoulder and spoke of the loneliness that there would be to you when I was gone. When I saw you on the wharf, standing with hands raised in benediction, I knew, as I had not known, even in Pretoria, how very, very dear you have become to me.”
For persons belonging to the same religious tradition a shared identity is defined by loyalty to person, doctrines or rituals.

In the case of friendship across traditions these may not be shared.
“When we met in South Africa, we met as brothers and remained as such to the end. It was not a friendship between an Englishman and an Indian. It was an unbreakable bond between two seekers and servants.”
For Gandhi, Truth was always beyond full human comprehension.

Andrew’s journey to India helped him to see the limits of his theology and to discover God in the teachings and practices of Hinduism.
The shared quality of openness to deeper religious truths was complimented by a deep concern to live their lives as servants of the poor and oppressed.
Though difficult, ethical obligations save interreligious friendships from superficiality and relativism.

Interreligious friendships do not require that we dispose of our deepest values and commitments.
“Instead of a letter, I have inflicted upon you what may almost read like an essay. But it was necessary that you should know what is passing in my mind at the present moment. You may now pronounce your judgment and mercilessly tear my ideas to pieces where you find them to be wrong.”
“It is so like him. Whenever he feels hurt over anything I have done—and this is by no means the first of such occasions— he deluges me with letters without waiting for an answer. For it is love speaking to love, not arguing. And so it has been over the burning of foreign clothes”.

GANDHI ON ANDREWS
“If I want a pattern of the ideal missionary, I should instance C.F. Andrews. If he were here, he would blush for what I want to say. I believe that he is today truer, broader, and better for his toleration of the other principal religions of the world. He never speaks with me about conversion to Christianity though we are closest friends. I have many friends, but the friendship between Charlie Andrews and myself is especially deep.”
The face of our friend is always before us and we learn to speak the same in his absence as in his presence. When trust is not established, public criticism of another tradition will be heard as demonization.
Gandhi believed that the right to criticize another tradition had to be earned. One had to first befriend the other, and to show reverence for all that is good in other tradition.
Generosity is the mutuality of giving and receiving. Interreligious friendships cannot grow and flourish if one thinks of oneself as having everything to give and nothing to receive.
There is a real fear that deep friendships across traditions will diminish one’s commitment and faithfulness to one’s own.
Diversity is not a problem to be overcome.
Friendship should not be used as a ploy in program of conversion.
Meaningful interreligious relationships exemplify a willingness to receive and to give.
The religious traditions of our neighbors are embodied in their lives and friendship deepens our understanding of their traditions.
Friendship does not require that we conceal our commitments.
Interreligious friendships grow deeper through a shared commitment to justice and the service of the oppressed and disadvantaged.
“Our hearts met from the first moment we saw one another and they have remained united by the strongest ties of love ever since. To be with him was an inspiration which awakened all that was best in me and gave me a high courage, enkindled and enlightened by his own.”
Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not.

Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own.

Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger.

I am uneasy at heart when I have to leave my accustomed shelter; I forget that there abides the old in the new, and that there also thou abidest.
If I were asked what had been the best of all human gifts in a long lifetime, I should answer without a moment’s hesitation, “The gift of noble friends who have trusted me with their love.”