There's no cheap path to harmony

AUSTRALIA

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Of the United Nations Days and Weeks, World Interfaith Harmony Week is one of the most recent and perhaps the most modestly celebrated. It may also be the most needed. But its claim needs to extend beyond religious faiths to secular views of the world.

The week originated in a proposal of King Abdullah of Jordan, a Muslim. He recognised that the great religions were united by their call to love God and their neighbour. They could come together on that basis without minimising the differences between them.

In Australia small local committees sponsor breakfasts, talks and gatherings to mark the week. These complement the all-important personal contact between people of different religions who are open to learn from one another about one another's faith.

These small initiatives and conversations, of course, are tiny when set against the violence in the name of religion that plagues the Middle East and elsewhere.

There, people of different Islamic groups and of other religions have been persecuted and polarised by IS with its corrupt and violent version of Islam. Hostility has been intensified by the intervention and destruction brought by foreign powers, which are then readily portrayed as anti-Islamic. Conflict fed by personal, political and economic interests is then framed in religious terms.

The conflict in the Middle East and terrorist incidents in other nations often provoke tense relationships between Muslim immigrant communities and the majority population in their host countries. This tension expresses itself in religious and ethnic prejudice and discriminatory laws, which in turn contributes to fear, withdrawal and alienation in
Muslim communities.

Disenfranchised young Muslims are then vulnerable to recruitment by IS or by whatever will replace it. So the cycle of violence is continued.

To break this cycle requires serious efforts to create interfaith harmony based on a sympathetic understanding of other people and what their faith means to them. In Western countries, including Australia, it is unreasonable to expect that Muslim leaders of Muslim, preoccupied with supporting their often poor and harried immigrant communities, will be able to take the initiative in this.

So the task must fall on the leaders of Christian churches, by first going out to seek trusting relationships with significant Muslim religious leaders, and then making similar relationships between Muslim communities and their own a high pastoral priority.

When people who are Muslim meet people who are Christian and explore each other's lived faith, the prejudices based on the selective quotation of texts, on polemical pamphlets and on the listing of historical atrocities are exposed for the lazy rubbish they are.

Because the task of building interfaith harmony is vital for societies at large and not simply for the churches, it needs to be encouraged in appropriate ways at all levels of society. Faith-based community organisations which welcome Muslim workers and are present among Muslim communities in Australia must encourage conversations about the place religious faith has in life.

That conversation cannot be confined to the churches and to those with religious faith. In the present cycle of violence and discrimination which focuses on religious difference, exploratory conversation about their different views of the world must take place between people of religious faith and those with a non-religious outlook.

The obstacle to such conversation is the religious settlement in Australia and Western nations, which can be described as negative tolerance. This is an implicit contract neither to interfere with the religious beliefs and practices of others nor to enter into serious conversation with them about it. This has the merit of avoiding conflict. It also protects our own prejudices.

But in the present cycle, where violence designed to produce religious conflict also sharpens regional conflict, spills out into threats to the prosperity and order of other nations, and feeds religious and ethnic discrimination and prejudice in our own society, negative tolerance offers no counterbalance. It simply stands on the sidelines.

In our situation and society prejudice and hostility can be countered only if we are ready to explore and appreciate other people's religious and non-religious beliefs and practices, not in order to adopt them, but because they are important to our fellow human beings. That conversation is not easy, because in it our own convictions and prejudices, religious, non-religious or anti-religious, will also be in play.

But is there a cheaper path to harmony, and can we afford the costs of intensifying disharmony?
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