

Friendship Across Religions

An Interreligious Manifesto

The following recognitions represent a summary of our work and the conclusions and lessons we would like to bring to the attention of religious leaders and communities. They grow out of the various insights and presentations offered from the perspectives of participating religions. They suggest a significant common ground upon which we, as scholars of different religions, can agree, despite our different faiths. We present these recognitions as a conclusion to our collaborative work and as an opening for dialogue and further reflection by leaders and communities, who may wish to articulate their own statements on the theme of interreligious friendship.

1. Background - Our Theological Work

Our project has sought to articulate what might be called “theologies of interreligious friendship,” that is: justifications for interreligious friendship that grow from the depth of religious thought and practice of our different traditions. Each of us feels his or her tradition provides adequate grounding for the following recognitions, which may be found in our papers. Here we shall only spell out the lessons learned and the recommendations that are to be made.

2. Understanding Friendship

2.1 Friendship is a term that is characterized by great elasticity and flexibility. It addresses various situations and describes different levels of relationship. Collectively, our work covers a broad range of friendships. However, we seek to highlight primarily those relationships that place the religious and spiritual dimensions of friendship, practiced across religions, at their forefront.

2.2 For purposes of convenience, we might distinguish between the *neighbor* and the *friend*. The *neighbor* is the person next to us, with whom we share some aspect of common life, and in relation

to whom we seek to cultivate some basic aspects of interreligious friendship. The *friend* is the person with whom we cultivate a deeper, more intentional, more focused, more intimate and ultimately more spiritual relationship.

2.3. Another way of distinguishing between these two types or poles of interreligious friendship is by referring to them as “general friendship” and as specialized or “spiritual friendship.” The former is the general friendship and benevolence that, as an ideal, should govern all our relationships, as different expressions of a life of goodness. The latter is a specific form of spiritual practice and sharing that is an intentional part of our spiritual life. Consequently, general friendship, towards the *neighbor*, is a universal ideal that should be practiced by all. Special spiritual friendship is more appropriate for those with deep religious commitment, and particularly for the specialist, the scholar, the leader, the person with deep roots in her tradition, who can share her knowledge and experience as part of the riches of interreligious friendship.

2.4 While the depth of the relationships differ, and while they bring us different fruits, basic guidelines and concerns that should govern interreligious friendship apply to both the *neighbor* and the *friend*. These include the following:

2.5 Interreligious friendship recognizes fundamental similarities that serve as its foundations. These similarities suggest that different religions share common purposes, despite the many differences we observe in the religions. These common purposes include the search for living in goodness and harmony, living an ethical life, and transcending ordinary life through aspiration and orientation of life toward a higher spiritual understanding of reality, or a supreme reality that lies “beyond,” called by most believers, “God.”

2.6 Friendship is a means of attaining and propagating

these higher goods, commonly recognized by our different religions.

2.7 While friendship is indeed an instrument - for the good and for spiritual growth, we recognize in interreligious friendship more than the instrumental relationship, by means of which economic, social, political, diplomatic or other ends are achieved. Friendship is recognized as an important goal and value, rather than simply as a means to attaining “non-spiritual” goals. Friendship thus lies beyond self-interest, and is characterized by a higher common interest.

2.8 Friendship is characterized by reciprocity and engages both sides to a relationship. Friendship is thus based on a mutual give and take.

3. Approaching Difference

3.1 Friendship, in some views, is also founded upon difference and is driven by the creative tension between similarity and difference.

3.2 It is our recognition that difference, and in particular difference in religious belief, is not a reason to avoid friendship. On the contrary, the challenge of constructing friendship across religious difference can lead to deep friendship and is the source of great mutual benefits.

3.3 Interreligious friendship is not friendship that casts aside religious difference, overlooking it in the interest of perceived commonality. Rather, it is friendship that keeps us mindful of religious difference, and approaches this difference as a means of learning, growth and transformation that occur within the friendship. Thus, religious difference can be approached as a source of blessing.

3.4 Recognition of difference is an invitation to learning and understanding. Mutual learning and the quest for mutual understanding are the hallmark of interreligious friendship.

3.5. Learning in the framework of interreligious friendship has the double benefit of better understanding of the other, as well as a much deeper self-understanding. We consider interreligious friendship a primary means for deepening self understanding of individuals and religious communities, as they seek to articulate their particular identity and vision in today’s world.

3.6 One important aspect of such mutual learning is the study of the Scriptures of the other, the friend. We recommend such reading take part in a spirit of friendship, benevolence and generosity, seeking to appreciate the beauty and the riches of the other’s Scripture, rather than finding fault in it. Open-minded engagement of the other’s Scripture may be

as transformative as interreligious friendship itself.

3.7 Each one of us affirms deeply the Truth taught in his or her religion and approaches it as an expression of Truth. This does not, however, prevent us from cultivating friends from other traditions, or engaging in a friendly approach to their Scriptures and wisdom. The spiritual commonality we recognize between our religions is ultimately of greater significance than differences in teaching, that believers affirm as Truth. Ultimately, the Truth that our traditions teaches us concerning the higher reality transcends our understanding. We approach our friends informed by a humility that allows us to be open to their testimony to the spiritual life and to the benefits this may bring us, without compromising or minimizing the Truth we affirm in our own traditions.

3.8 As we approach our friend from another religion, we do so with a heart that is open to what lies beyond our differences.

4. Upholding Identity

4.1 Our religious traditions have long-standing concern with issues of integrity, authenticity and identity. Maintaining the identity of our religious community is a primary concern of the teachings of our religions, as taught today.

4.2 The practice of interreligious friendship should not be a means of weakening or diluting identity. Rather, it should be a means of strengthening and deepening it.

4.3 For this reason the kind of deep interreligious friendship, referred to above (2.3) as the *friend*, is best practiced by individuals firmly rooted in their traditions. The practice is particularly appropriate for those who have deep religious commitment to their tradition, and in particular for religious leaders, teachers and specialists. For these, the dangers to identity are almost nonexistent, while the benefits of understanding, enrichment and self transformation are enormous.

4.4 Practice of interreligious friendship requires trust. The trust is conditioned upon the degree of security that a particular community under specific circumstances feels. It is also related to the way in which members of the other religion offer and practice friendship. Trust in friendship must be mutual.

4.5 We consequently condemn unequivocally any attempt to practice interreligious friendship as a means of proselytizing and gaining members to one’s religion from among “friends” falsely acquired.

5. Practicing Speech

5.1 We have come to recognize that in many ways practicing interreligious friendship is closely related to how we speak. Given the centrality of speech, we wish to offer the following recommendations:

5.2 Communication is central to the practice of interreligious friendship. We recommend open and honest communication. Such communication neither avoids nor covers up topics of potential complexity, while at the same time respecting the Other, and recognizing that not everything can be spoken about at any time.

5.3 Questioning is an important part of interreligious friendship and the processes of learning that are fundamental to it. Friends must be willing to question and to be questioned.

5.4 Given the trust that is the foundation of advanced interreligious friendship, friends must also be open to the possibility of hard questions, regarding their faith or the history associated with their faith tradition. Hard questions are part of honest speech, but must be clearly distinguished from attack or criticism. Based on circumstances and the depth of relationships, such hard questions may be posed privately or in the setting of a public sharing.

5.5 Willingness to ask penetrating questions is tempered by charitable speech, that seeks to find the good and that searches for understanding, with a spirit of benevolence.

5.6 In interreligious friendships, the face of our friend is always before us. We learn to speak the same in the absence as in the presence of the friend, thereby ensuring genuine communication, that has integrated the lessons and the reality of friendship.

6 Friendship in Action

6.1 Action is a primary arena for the manifestation of friendship. We expect from our friends support, collaboration and solidarity when issues pertaining to the well-being of one of the friends arise. This is as true of interreligious friendship as it is of any form of friendship.

6.2 Interreligious friendship can be born from common dedication to ideals and social causes that express those ideals, such as social justice, fighting hatred, poverty and illness. While such collaboration provides an entryway into friendship, it only becomes genuine interreligious friendship when the distinct religious identity of the two friends becomes an operative and defining feature of the relationship.

6.3 Common action for the good is also a means of expressing friendship. The deeper commonality shared by friends finds expression through shared

commitment and collaboration for the well-being of society and the world.

7 Friendship as Spiritual Gift

7.1 As we move from ignoring differences to recognizing, understanding and respecting our differences, we are also called to discover a deeper unity that transcends our differences. This unity is discovered where friendship goes beyond a human or even religious relationship, and is recognized as a spiritual event involving the Divine, or the depths of being, that manifest through friendship.

7.2 There is a point where both friends look beyond to a higher reality that unifies them, and that is made manifest through their very friendship.

7.3 The attitude of friendship is here recognized as open receptivity to a gift, to something that is beyond their ability to produce.

7.4 The depth of the heart and the fullness of love are unleashed where friendship is recognized as something more than human. Love is expressed in different degrees through varying levels of friendship. It finds its fullest expression in a friendship that is consciously grounded in God, or in the ultimate reality, deeply grounded in the human heart, the being of the person. The fullness of love is grounded in the depth of the heart, beyond the differences of particular religious identities.

8 A Final Recommendation

As a means of adopting the practice of interreligious friendship, we recommend that every person seek at least one friend from another religion. How that friendship is practiced and the depth of its engagement will vary according to individual circumstances. But it only takes one friend to change our orientation, to broaden our horizons, to open our heart and to make us ready for the transformation that interreligious friendship produces.