

Wolpe Dialogue – 7 September 2011 - Towards a more tolerant society

Questions

1. I am much more interested in the hegemony of Christianity in this country. I am interested in the history of Christianity and missionaries in this country and how this affected the local people. How much damage was done by these missionaries? Why is the majority of this country in so much suffering yet they praise Him or Her every week?
2. There are some people who are not represented there tonight – what about the skeptics, the atheists and people of that persuasion. There is a campaign at the moment to make a list of people of this perspective in the USA, which is quite chilling. While many of us may profess in a religion, we are generally just ticking the box rather than believing in a faith. So, where are the atheists on the panel?
3. To Dr Story and Dr Fareed – can they reconcile what they said? Dr Story said that it is a dangerous time where a secular society sets up a religious desk, as in the ANC setting up a religious council. But Dr Fareed said civil society should not leave religion to the religionists. I want to know what Dr Fareed meant by that. I agree that politicians should stick to politics.

Reverend Dr Peter Story

On this panel, I am a white male, not a good thing to be these days. But I am also a Christian and therefore represent this culture that has dominated South Africa. I hope you heard me say ‘G-d save us from that kind of South Africa [the state-sanctioned religious kind]’. And so that does mean that we need to establish the role played by missionaries in that stage. I believe it was mixed. We need to acknowledge the bad – missionaries often were instruments of the colonial government. While at other times, they were the only voices standing up against the colonial enterprise.

As a Christian, I regard the introduction of the gospel into South Africa as one that added enormous value. But the messengers were often not living its core, only its expression through the political values of the time.

The second question is one of the deepest mysteries. Why is it that the majority of people in this country suffers but then lifts up their hands every Sunday in praise? I suppose the question is ‘whose G-d is G-d?’ If He is a G-d that is the omnipotent magician in the sky, then he is messing up very badly. But if G-d is a G-d who stands with people in their suffering, even if He does not wipe it away, then He relies on us as the instruments of liberation.

Civil society – I would be the last ones to say that politicians should not talk about religion as I would be the last one to say that religion should not talk about politics (because if you are not talking about politics, then you are not talking about life – your G-d might be locked up and domesticated. G-d has a lot to say about politics). But what I do want to resist is when government thinks that it has a role in *shaping* religion. Government needs to listen to what the spiritual leaders of our society have to say because they will learn a lot about themselves. But when they set up a desk that tries to shape

religion according to their ideology that was something that I last saw in Hitler's Germany, and I don't like it.

Dr Muneer Fareed

It is important to hold religionists to their own standards. For instance, all religionists aim to eliminate prejudice. But, they are unable to see it when they exercise it themselves. How do we get past this conundrum? Civil society can play this role. The involvement is at the level of discrimination where a particular religion has a negative impact on fellow religionists or people outside the community, this is where civil society must get involved. As members of civil society, from our experiences, is that religion is not dead and continues to play a very active role in society.

On the one hand, as civil society, we want to establish structures that facilitate harmony and tranquility. And if that comes in the form of religion, then so be it.

[Question from the crowd - Are you saying that civil society can intervene in religion? To what extent do you think this is desirable?]

You have several examples of this in the West – in Utah, polygamy was outlawed due to civil societies' involvement. It was banned in Tunisia as well due to civil society. The odious practice of *sati*, which was common place in Hinduism, where the wife immolated herself on the husbands' pyre, was outlawed by Muslim when they ruled parts of India and then by the British.

Rabbi Greg Alexander

There is something in common between question one and two. And it is this – what is the role of religion in society? Well, religion should do the things that we want religion to do. In other words: to build communities of faith, of love and of justice. If you look at the Jewish Bible, the vast majority of it is dedicated to the prophets whose task it was to keep society 'on line'. And where the king or the priest had strayed, the prophet jumped in to say 'no! this is wrong, and this is why it is wrong!' In the Torah portion last week, we had the famous injunction 'Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof!' translated as 'Justice, Justice, you shall pursue'. This is at the core of the role of religion in society. We should not separate them.

But the question is, what is the *role* of religion? I think that each of our faiths is trying to make a society that is more loving and more just. But the problem is what people do with religious texts and when people in power use them to justify their political actions. And what we need to do is to re-evaluate these sources in their context, not to decontextualise them to suit our present purpose. This is what happens when people use religion as the basis for political action

Nomashaka Taho

The role of the religious leader is to bring the community together. Not to separate them. The role is also to share. When you are doing something, like slaughtering a goat, that is where the community is going to come to the family feast. That is where you share what you are doing with the community. Our religion is to slaughter a cow or a goat and share that between the family and then with the community. In our religion, everything is a circle. When you eat, we sit in a circle, the kraal

is a circle, the house is a circle. When you eat, you use only one spoon, this is the way of everything you have: you share. You do not use it on your own.

Questions

4. One of the things that was spoken about was S16(2) of the Constitution and freedom of expression is important and how it when religions come together they can talk nice nice etc. But I want to get back to the crisis in this country and it is an economic crisis. Religions do not do enough in this country to address the fundamental issues that really face us. Where is our 'liberation theology'? If you want to talk about religious prejudice and building a decent, tolerant, just society, then we need religions that are going to challenge the power structures and rebuild a decent society and religions, overall, are not playing that role today.
5. Everyone is trying to differentiate between religion and politics. But may I suggest that there is no difference – they are just different ways of organizing communities. It all becomes about branding and power.
6. My question goes to the Reverend – when you say that politicians should not go to churches? My comment, all the speakers came with their reservations, but they did not come out with their principles. For example, in Islam you say 'Allah is the way', in Christianity you say 'Jesus is the way to G-d'. So the speakers failed to give us a picture – what is the basis of life? Where do we come from? Where are we going? We need this so that the discussions that we have, have a basis. One more thing, look at the body of how it works – if the eye is sore, the hand moves automatically to assist it.
7. To Professor Fareed, you must be aware of pseudo-science. I am a scientist and that is how I earn my living. And there is an awful lot of pseudoscience around. What we really need is education - not religious education, but education. Because ignorance is affecting our society more than anything else.
8. Overall, we need to go beyond the *tolerance* in this society. Nomachaka, how do we refer to your religion, 'African traditional religion', or just 'African religion'? To Peter Story, I believe that we have had religious wars in Africa and we are at war at the moment. It might not be as visible but it is happening right here right now.
9. I wanted to pose a question regarding faith based education to the rabbi. We are looking at power and branding and bums of seats and developing religious identity. Is there a dominant role that faith based education can play in moving our schools towards religious appreciation and diversity appreciation, or do you think, from practical experience, are we not becoming more sectarian, because it frightens me what I am seeing in faith based education today.

Dr Fareed

Certainly there is a genre of literature out there masquerading as science but even scientists struggle to make that distinction. So you have scientists out from Korea announcing the discovery of cold fusion and it is a whole long time before scientists wrap their head around this to say 'no, no, no, this is not cold fusion'.

And with regard to the social scientists, it is even more problematic because social science is informed by social biases. The physical sciences are much easier to verify by doing similar experiments throughout the world.

But in the area of experiments or studies in the social sciences, they are area, culture and time specific. So it becomes more problematic to replicate them to test for bias.

Professor Story

The issue of where are the people of faith speaking truth to power, where are the people of faith standing alongside the poor and oppressed, where is economic liberation theology? This is vitally needed. All I can say is 'amen' and 'amen'. For some reason, since 1994, many of the people who came into the leadership of our faith communities seems to believe that with the coming of democracy, that the Kingdom of G-d had arrived. But, of course, they have been brutally disappointed since then. But I think that crucially, a new culture of silence amongst church leaders shames me. There was a time when I think that you could rely on church leaders to speak out on issues political and economic. We need to speak truth to religious powers and take up the role that the rabbi described when he was talking about the Hebrew prophets.

Nomachaka

You can call it 'African religion' without saying 'African traditional religion'. Why did we not express our principles that we are sharing with the audience? But we have power in the power from our slaughtering a goat or a cow. From there, we have bones of our people that our ancestors that we use to invoke as a way of praying. We cannot go straight to G-d without invoking our ancestor's bones. And then from there now is G-d, our creator.

Rabbi Greg

In my experience here, in the UK and in the USA, is that faith based education is one of those things that you can get it really right and really wrong. Some schools educate people about the positive aspects of their religion and the universal components of other religions. Sometimes there are other schools that can become *laagers* which engage in religious naval gazing and building up knowledge of only ourselves and our values. I want to try to use the position of strength which is a faith based school has because it can establish some common ground. But I want to make sure that the windows are facing outwards and that the arrows are pointing outwards and not just inwards.

History has a lot to play in the way that religion operates. Certainly the Jewish community often shouts from the rooftops about the examples of Jewish liberation fighters who fought for the liberation of this country. However, the number of Jewish fighters who did so from a Jewish religious basis, who were rabbis and who were fighting with their communities behind them, that list is very short.

My congregation just launched our own NGO called 'SACRED' which will be an opportunity for us as a religious organization to be able to speak to the issues of the day from a religious and a Jewish perspective on the issues where we think a Jewish voice is important.

But I think that our history has not helped.