

THE MISSION OF INTERFAITH IN OUR PRESENT TIME

PREPARED FOR HIS HOLINESS GURU DILEEP
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MARCH 6, 2022



TWELVE GATES
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Living harmoniously in an interfaith world



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INTRODUCTION

I am honored to be invited to offer thoughts for this publication of Guru Dileepkumar Thankappan, recognizing 50 years of community service.

Working on many projects together with Guruji over the years has been an unchanging and constant blessing for me. We both are dedicated to rigorous spiritual life and devotion, to human and social welfare, and to the ideals of interfaith. As such our work together extends and manifests these passions and purposes.

Given my decades-long investment pursuing the ideal of interreligious concord and collaboration, I was asked to offer thoughts on interfaith for this volume. I teach interfaith courses at all university levels, including for Ph.Ds. As such I could write or speak for days on the subject. I will confine my comments to 1. A small selection of timeless, indispensable bases for the work, and 2. Comment on the current state of the enterprise in 2022.

FOUNDATIONS

I have selected four (of several) minimum conditions for people who hope to contribute substantially and enduringly to interfaith peace and progress, These are:

01

Interfaith work requires not only skills and training in order to be reliable and effective, but it also requires philosophical, ideological, and lifestyle commitments on the part of those who wish to be significant and genuinely helpful in the world in this particular arena.

02

Interfaith must be taken seriously by its practitioners, affording the enterprise all the same clarity, complexity, and precision as any other life-work and calling. Think neurosurgery, banking and investing, automobile manufacturing and so on. In none of these fields would we wish to be served by someone who is careless or slapdash in their understanding and approach to their work. Similarly, interfaith should be approached with the same seriousness and discipline.

03

Interfaith leaders must be intimately familiar with the passions that characterize a dedicated and seriously pursued life of faith. They cannot be imitations of United Nations diplomats in \$1,500 suits, masters of speaking in veiled obfuscation, and superficial niceties. Religion relates to God who sees all. The pursuit of unity in religion must be understood as taking place before the all-knowing eyes of God, the fiery light of truth, and intense personal commitment.

O4

Interfaith work must have structures of education and mentorship. People of interfaith accomplishment and stature must have a side of their lives dedicated to the formation of heirs and successors. This too requires the attainment of qualities that are worthy and that attract apprentices to the cause and to the work.

These are some (not all) of the timeless basics that must always obtain in the arena of interfaith. At minimum, these four qualities must characterize every serious interfaith effort, person and initiative. These are the skeleton and nervous system on which the larger world of interfaith must be built.

These four timeless pillars I identify above are unchanging. If these are firm, vital, and intact, interfaith can be alert, responsive, and progressive. In short, relevant, apropos. If the pillars delineated above are absent, artificial, or flimsy, then efforts in interfaith become trendy, following, chasing, without authority or impact. They become the hobby and entertainment of the “club of the enlightened,” unlike the “backward, religious rank and file, narrowly bound in their respective religions and sects.”

Longing for relevance is undignified, and non-productive. But because the world changes so constantly, ever more rapidly, and with ever greater leaps and intensity, it is very hard for interfaith to keep up, and to hold people’s attention. This provides a great danger for interfaith practitioners, causing the labor often to become indistinguishable from all other recitations of social justice or environmental concerns. These concerns are not to be diminished in any way, but interfaith challenges are unique to the world of faith and religion and deserve the attention and care of experts who alone can begin to bring resolution to the varieties of disorder in the arena of interfaith relations.

OUR PRESENT TIME

In order to understand the mission of interfaith in the present moment, we can examine the context in which this work unfolds from two separate but interrelated viewpoints.

1. From the evolution through time of interfaith activity. (For example, has interfaith changed in the past 100 years? If so, how?)
2. From the standpoint of how the world around has evolved and changed, (and is changing). (Likewise, in what ways is the world different now from how it was 100 years ago.)

Finally, there is a third point of context relevant to the pursuit of interfaith that is in ways a bridge or a subset of the above point 2, “how the world has changed,” and that is: What is the current situation in the world of religion itself?

Looking at the world of interfaith through the prism of these categories might be understood as something similar to looking at the automobile industry. To get a good read on the current state of affairs, we have to look, not only at changes and improvements in the actual manufacture of cars, but also “how has the world changed?” How are roads different from how they were 100 years ago? Are fuels different from what was used 100 years ago? And so forth.

Sports would create a similar metaphor. We cannot merely ask about homerun or stolen base records. Are the players bigger and stronger? Are the gloves bigger? Are the bats and balls livelier? In short, the enterprise itself, and the context.

And so it is with interfaith. We cannot just look to see if we are becoming more skilled, more knowledgeable, and better able to work together with people of other faiths. We need also to assess the world context in which our interfaith efforts take place. Are religions as vital or as relevant in society today as they were 100 years ago? Are we presently in a time of peace and prosperity? Or are

we in a time of war and uncertainty? The mission of interfaith changes also as its circumstances change.

Although knowledgeable experts trace present day interfaith to origins at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, a more applicable look at the current world of interfaith traces itself more fruitfully to the period between the late 1940s through the 1960s. This is because there are people alive and active in interfaith still today who have had direct personal knowledge of key figures and activities from this time, experiences with such groups as World Congress of Faiths (London), and Temple of Understanding (New York). From these (and others of different concept and formation), there emerged in the intervening year approximately 580 international, interfaith organizations. And many 100s (if not 1000s) if we count local area interfaith groups.

During this period of expansion (c. 1960 – present), I argue that a seminal dividing line in the status of interfaith is September 11, 2001. I mark this date, not because interfaith work itself changed markedly at this juncture, but rather because the legitimacy and importance of the work broke into the secular mainstream. This tragedy woke up the arrogant, secular, power elite. “See. I told you religion was important.” The hubris of secular peace seekers was pulled up, and for the first time since the Scopes Trial the elite intelligentsia turned reluctantly to interfaith leaders to wonder aloud about that odd and archaic curiosity called faith, belief, religion.

The development of interfaith since 2000 then, necessarily has been different from its time prior. In the time prior, outstanding, creative, insightful, and progressive work took place. Of course, not without serious problems and challenges. One big pitfall in that half century of progress came from the “subsuming’ or “umbrella” phenomenon. In ironic ways the interfaith community became subject to the very denominationalism it imagined itself to be in line to solve. Each new “umbrella” organization that purported to be the higher vision of unity, simply became “yet another” group.

Not all groups arose from egoism, and not getting along. Many differing groups are most valuable in being oriented to a specific niche or orientation. Surely no one group can do everything, and the multiplication of focuses and niche specialties is needed, and good.

Post-2000 posed another special challenge to interfaith development. This was the challenge of expanding in a time of popular acceptance. As interfaith (and its leaders and sages) became recognized as needed and vital to the pursuit of peace, their status brought them into the “big leagues,” and with this a new type of danger or seduction happened. Now people of high interfaith stature found themselves invited to “the ball.” banquets, high tea, tuxes, status, and international travel.

These are normal ebbs and flows in the sectors of life and society.

But I recommend now that interfaith needs to move beyond the success of having awoken the intelligentsia elite to the importance of faith and belief, and turn to define the work to a next challenge looming on the horizon of religion and interreligious relations. For me, that challenge is the eminent restructuring of religion itself in the torrent of the current moment. Many see the abandonment of established religion and the spread of such phenomena as “the rise of the NONES” as “the decline of religion,” and indeed religious formation tragically has declined, giving rise to an increasingly, morally dead social mainstream.

The hyper speed of technological advance in our time guarantees that faith, religion, and religious community can never be the same or return to as it was even recently. The heroes of interfaith, and the enlightened and compassionate in all the great, major faiths and traditions, must work deeply, closely, and with great love for one another to help each other rescue their claim on the souls of their respective believers.

It was fun to go to the ball. But now, our 70 years of maturing as the interfaith family has a desperate task before us. It’s time to get back to work.



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