

The Role of Interfaith Activities in Building Peace

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Professor Paul Morris, Religious Studies Programme

Victoria University of Wellington

1 Pursuers of Peace

We are beset with building metaphors. We're 'building peace' and 'strengthening spirituality'. This language conjures up images of modernity, of reinforcing, and retaining walls! The biblical metaphors are often different and among the verbs linked to shalom - peace - are baqash and radaf - to seek and pursue peace.

Psalm 34: 15 (in Christian Bibles it is Psalm 34:14) reads:

טו סור מרע, ועשה-טוב בקש שלום ורחמיהו.

Sur me-ra', ve-'asah-tov baqash shalom ve-radaphe-u

15 Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

Here the language is dynamic, nomadic, of movement, of leaving and seeking and pursuing. Peace is a journey that you have to look for and then follow rather than a project to be erected. Good is something that we can do but shalom is something we have to seek and pursue. Shalom is a word rich in resonance, from the root, shalam, to complete, finish, be whole, and it connotes completeness, safety, friendship, welfare, health, prosperity, righteousnessⁱ and, of course, peace. Shalom is thus not simply the absence of war but a positive quality, a life that is complete and full. The biblical tradition understands this shalom to be a blessing.

Why do we need to seek out peace and pursue it? Peace is elusive and just when we feel we have it in our grasp we discover that it has slipped away. There is precious little of it in the Bible or in our lives. In Hebrew the standard greeting is shalom aleihum, peace be upon you and the rabbinic tradition teaches that there is no higher blessing than that of shalom.

Drawing on the reference from the Psalms above, the rabbis understood that all of us were called to be ohve shalom and rodfe shalom, lovers of peace and pursuers of peaceⁱⁱ. This notion is familiar to Christians too from the New Testamentⁱⁱⁱ. Our commentators teach that while it is easy to love shalom and earnestly desire it will not just arrive but has to be actively chased

after. Peace requires action. **My contention is that all of us here as people of faith must become rodfe shalom, peace pursuers.**

2 Religious Visions of Peace

The first role - another metaphor – that religious communities have to play in pursuing peace is in promoting their unique visions, in the plural, of peace. It is hard to think of secular alternatives to the religious visions of peace. We live in a world dominated by ideologies of conflict, gnostic heresies that preach that good will come out of evil and violence, or that violence is inevitable and conflict eternal. For example, our two leading ideologies - evolutionary neo-Darwinism and aggressive global capitalism - are both accounts of finally irresolvable violence and conflict.

If we explore, for example, the biblical Book of Leviticus, we discover an elaborate and wonderful portrayal of shalom, together with a practical guide to seek peace and how to pursue it. This vision starts from individuals, then to families, extended families, tribes, the nation, the nations. This vision of shalom leads up to all peoples under the mishkan, the protective tabernacle of God.

Augustine, the leading Christian theologian offers us a sublime vision of peace, a peace beyond violence, a pacific vision beyond conflict. There are Islamic and Buddhist versions and Hindu and Sikh versions too. These are startling visions of peace beyond ‘might is right’ and so-called ‘real politics’. Why you might ask do we hear so little of these pacific visions and so much more of conflicts and tensions between religious communities? It is, of course, true that religions both advocate peace, as well as violence in certain circumstances. My view is that this makes the promotion of these visions of peace all the more urgent. We do not seem to have any secular alternatives – the US military commander, General Alexander Haig was reported to have claimed that, ‘There are just some things that are more important than peace’!

3 The Role of Interfaith

Interfaith activities allow us to meet one another to share our concerns. We need to develop these relationships beyond just periodic meetings and acknowledgement. They have to be robust enough to survive tensions and challenges. My personal view is that we are much too polite to each other and we need to raise our real differences alongside our share concerns if we are to develop the levels of trust necessary for living with our differences. We do share many

things but our real and profound differences are just as important part of our faiths. We have the advantage of our small size in New Zealand – so often a factor that disadvantages us – so that we can get to know each other personally not just locally but nationally too. Our collective interfaith contribution is to foster debate about peace beyond the discourses of strategic advantage, trade benefits and rational calculation, that it to recognise that there is a possibility of peace at all. Not just the peace we seek – the mere end of hostilities – but to pursue a peace that endures and generates alternative ways of dealing with violence and dissention as they arise. We need to spend time exploring and explicating the religious possibilities of peace and making them known to the wider public. We need to remind each other of our visions of peace.

4 Interfaith Activities for Peace

The last biblical insight that I want to introduce is that of shalom bayit (pursuing peace in the home/family) In Leviticus the claim is that it takes peaceful individuals to create a peaceful home/family (the Hebrew word bayit refers to both), and only peaceful families can create peaceful communities, and in turn only peaceful communities can create peaceful nations, and finally only nations at peace can play their role turning the pacific vision into a peaceful reality. This chain is entirely dependent upon us starting with our own families (and we know how hard that can be!) and in our own religious and local communities. We have to begin at the most practical level with meeting, getting to know each other and our families, sharing, building trust and working together in pursuing our common tasks. It is a life's work. Every little helps. We need to take this message back to our respective communities, mobilise support, seek out each other and work collaboratively. I heard recently of an Indonesian who considered that interfaith was much easier than dialogue with some of his Muslim co-religionists!

5 Conclusion

Without our religious visions of peace there can only ever be ever-more so-called necessary, pragmatic violence and conflict. Our peaceful visions are necessary to break out of these modernist paradigms and begin the seeking of a peaceful vision to pursue. The significance of interfaith activity is that while we can begin with our own families and communities we cannot pursue peace without the other faith communities and those beyond.

Let the last word go to the prophet Micah (4:5) – lest we consider that these peaceful visions entail a religious uniformity

הָ כִּי, כָּל-הָעַמִּים, יִלְכוּ, אִישׁ בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהָיו; וְאֲנַחְנוּ, נֵלֶךְ בְּשֵׁם-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ--לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

Ki, kol ha-amim. Ye-lhu, ish be-she-m elohav; ve-anahnu, ne-le-k be-she-m
elohe-nu le'olam vaed

5 For let all the peoples walk each one in the name of its god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.

ⁱ See Psalm 72:3; 85:10; Isaiah 32:17; 48:18; 60:17 where righteousness and peace are identified.

ⁱⁱ ... Hillel says: Be from among the students of Aharon; one who loves peace, one who pursues peace, one who loves others ... (*Mishnah, Pirke Avot* 1:12).

ⁱⁱⁱ See, Romans 9:30, 1 Timothy 6:11, and 2 Timothy 2:22.