

True Life in God Pilgrimage in Moscow - 1-10 September 2017

HOW TO BRIDGE OUR DIVISIONS AND BRING PEACE TO THE WORLD?

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My name is Alon Goshen Gottstein, I'm a Rabbi, an academic and an author of more than a dozen books on interfaith relations and collaborative research projects. 20 years ago I founded, and still direct, a global organization called The Elijah Interfaith Institute. Our task has been to deepen understanding, foster friendship and increase unity between religious leaders and communities worldwide. Through study, spiritual sharing and a rich program we have transformed the attitudes and mind sets of thousands of religious leaders and practitioners, developing friendship and trust, including many of the voices you will hear today. I am grateful to Vassula for her ongoing work that is so much in line with our own. And I was deeply moved when she decided to feature the video of friendship made by religious leaders at the opening of this gathering and to recommend that all of you see it and share it further. It is a sign of deep commonality of vision, and for that I give thanks to God.

I would like to share my message with you as a kind of commentary on what is already my message, and my life vocation – a message and vocation of friendship across religions.

Making friends across religions is actually a novel concept. All religions have and promote the so-called Golden Rule. This is true of literally all religions, East and West, from Islam to Confucius, from Judaism to Buddhism. Let me share one well known example from my tradition. A noted rabbi, around the time of Jesus, Hillel was his name, once was asked to teach the entire Torah to someone who was standing on one leg. He summed it up as follows: "Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself. That's the whole Torah, the rest is explication", he said. This Golden Rule, whether presented in terms of what to do or what not to do, is present in all world religions.

But in today's world we need to go further. We need to find positive meaning in relationships and we need to provide the antidote to hatred, intolerance and violence. This requires a teaching of friendship and developing this as a common message of world religious leaders is an important development, even a small revolution, in terms of the teachings of religions. For the most part, they have emphasized friendship within, not friendship to all. Affirming an active friendship to the religious other is thus an important moment and a sign of the times. It shows how religion and religious leaders can articulate a new and appropriate message, when so many consider they not only have nothing meaningful to say but that they are indeed the source of the problem.

Of course, we can't deny that in the books of many religions you can find texts that are not very open, even hostile, to people of other faiths. When the world's most important leaders call for friendship, they are in fact affirming a particular way of practicing religion and rejecting another; they are preferring some texts over others, and are either drawing on historic precedents or creating them, over and against other models that have emerged. In this they exercise their leadership to the full.

This will allow you to appreciate why as a scholar, and as a leader of leaders and as someone who works within all religious traditions to help them advance to greater unity and harmony, this is a great personal moment for me. Whatever else this moment is, it is also a moment of great and authentic spiritual teaching. And in today's world, as I have discovered through decades of working with religious leaders, authentic spiritual teaching can, and must, be delivered jointly by teachers of different religions.

It is the reality that religions can cultivate friendship and understanding. It is a reality that is already lived by a group of premier world religious leaders, and many many others. Yet, it's also a reality that is almost a secret and is unknown by the common person.

Why is this a secret and why does the man on the street not know that people can be friends across religions? I can offer 3 reasons for it, and no, I am not going to blame the media. :

1. Religions are meant to raise humanity to spiritual heights. Love of the other and the deeper unity of mankind are fundamental teachings of all religions. But religions, sadly, often enough serve group interests and

enforce particular identities, at the expense of the higher calling of religion. So religions in some way can malfunction in certain contexts.

2. (local) Religious leaders do not receive the best training. because they are often trained only in the particularity of their tradition and its preservation, they often do not come to understand the higher teachings of their own religions.
3. Religion is all too often intertwined with politics, and that causes a loss of spiritual vision. This sometimes leads to violence, religious competition and hatred and rejection of the other.

But this need not be the case. Religious leaders are of central importance to all traditions and have been able to rise above limitations often associated with religion. And today the most prominent leaders of the world's major religions are delivering a common vision of friendship to the world at large.

And that's why this appeal is so important. It reminds us of the highest teachings of our religions. Let me refer to my own tradition. The Jewish people have suffered such persecution for thousands of years that within Judaism a kind of spiritual xenophobia has taken hold. Yet, recalling Judaism's higher teachings of divine unity, love and compassion for all, allows teachers and authorities within Judaism to recall something that is higher than historical circumstance, the pain it created and the natural urge to latch on to painful memory. So, when a figure like R. Nachman of Breslav speaks of compassion as the universal value for all, or when Rav Kook speaks of the notion of universal friendship, they are reminding us of the kind of Judaism we want to live today, and what I, and many others, consider to be the spiritually true and authentic Judaism.

The same goes for Christianity. Speaking as a Christian (a privilege that I have as an interfaith entrepreneur) I (that is Bishop Stephen Sykes of the Church of England) note that there have been two voices in the Christian tradition. One hostile, the other hospitable to the other. The issue of hospitality is a burning issue today and a foundation for extending friendship to others. When we realize that the hostile voice emerged from a community that was fighting for its survival and for its identity, as Bishop Sykes suggests, then we are free to recover the core message of the tradition – one of friendship and hospitality.

I'm grateful that the world's most prominent religious leaders were willing to make this appeal and my dream is that this appeal will stimulate the man and woman in the street to rethink the attitudes they hold and actually open up to

friendship across religions and to learning about other faiths, so that the friendship and the relationships are real, solid and long-lasting.

A call is amazing. But we need to help people to take practical steps to realize the call. This is why we've designed toolkits, one for the common person, where she can find recommendations for practising friendship across religions in every day life. The other is for religious leaders, and it seeks to equip them with the principles and method by means of which they can bring positive change and positive relationships to their communities. I'd therefore like to use this moment to issue an invitation to the man and the street, but in particular to the thousands of local leaders worldwide, to download toolkits we have developed in order to implement and advance a community oriented program of cultivating friendship across religions.

The universal toolkit makes specific recommendations, as do the religious leaders in our appeal, for how to make friends – share a meal, engage in conversation, take a walk.

The toolkit for religious leaders helps cultivate an atmosphere of respectful sharing and learning, offering principles of study and texts that can be studied, as a way of cultivating friendship and enhancing mutual understanding.

So, my message and my request to all of you is simple. Don't stop with watching a video or clapping hands. Take it further. There is inspiration from the world's premier leaders on our dedicated youtube channel. There are suggestions and advice for making friends. Don't applaud from the gallery. Join the movement, make it your own and share the fruit with others.

Thank you.