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## Interfaith Dialogue or Interfaith Deal?

### Speaking Honestly To Ourselves and Each Other About Our Religious Identity

I am glad to be here – and thanks to Dr. Sellers for inviting me; earlier today I addressed the topic of a Jewish Theology of Liberation at Logsdon Seminary; tomorrow I speak at McMurray University and Abilene Christian University – so a mini-speaking tour.

I like touring, speaking at a number of venues over a few days – during that time the many angles of the subjects I am speaking about can be addressed – more so than in any one event.

Like life, touring is a continuing conversation.

Like religion, that continuing conversation raises more questions than can be answered.

A continuing conversation yields a series of questions, questions that we know and thought we had an answer to, questions that we are searching for an answer to, questions we hadn't thought of before, and questions we don't want to hear.

A continuing conversation – touring, life, religion – is as much about identity as it is about truth – our identity as a person, as persons in a wider community – or rather communities – as part of the human race, as an American, as a Jew, Christian, Muslim – as a male, female - as a Texan.

I'll never forget the first time I came to Baylor to deliver a series of lectures; I was welcomed at the airport in Dallas by an alum of Baylor – he needed to pick up a few items at the local supermarket – and in the aisle he noticed a friend of his, said hello, and introduced me. With a big smile, the gentleman said: "Welcome to Texas!" Almost as if I had entered a particular part of the United States – or entered another, very special country. Since I travel a lot internationally, I instinctively checked my pocket for my Passport!

Tonight I want to address the question of our religious identities and the continuing conversation that these identities represent; after all, identities are not, like Passports, issued by some higher authority, they are created, they change, they are mobilized, demobilized; they can be at peace, then at war, then at peace again – with other religious identities.

What it once meant to be a Christian, say in the first century, is not what it meant to be a Christian in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, or the 16<sup>th</sup> century, or the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or today. This is true for Jews as well – one writer has postulated that Jewish history yields at least 7 different Jewish cultures – and he speculates further that each Jewish culture is so different from the other that each culture would have trouble viewing the other as Jewish.

What is true for Jews and Christians is also true for Islam. There has never been one Islam, from Mohammed to the present. There isn't one Islam today. There are many Islam's, Christianity's, Judaism's.

So tonight we have Jews, Christians and Muslims – or we could – sitting together in relative harmony – while historically or even today there are places in the world where Jews may be at odds with Christians, Muslims with Christians, Jews with Muslims – the variations are endless.

We want to celebrate the harmony we have achieved here – in many parts of America. But we don't want to be naïve about that harmony.

Before that harmony, blood has flowed in the streets – say the history of Christian anti-Semitism – Martin Luther – the founder of the Reformation - is only one religious example of Christian hatred of Jews; the Catholic Church pioneered in the ghettoization of Jews.

With regard to the split in Christianity – which was quite bloody itself - Catholics and Protestants shared a mutual disdain for Jews. In Nazi Germany, Catholics and Protestants could join together in enmity or remain silent on the issue of Jews. Though elements of both the Protestant and Catholic churches had negative views of Hitler, they couldn't oppose the Nazis' understanding of Jews – there was too much agreement there.

At Baylor, I teach a course titled "Hitler and the Holocaust" each spring and you would be amazed how my students, almost all Christian, cannot wrap their mind around the fact that Christianity historically has been anti-Semitic, deeply so, and not as an add-on. At its very heart.

This anti-Semitism has denigrated Jews – as the incarnation of the devil, killer of Jesus and God, betrayer of everything decent in the world, as parasites living off and subverting Christian civilization – the list goes on.

In Medieval times, statues in churches depicted Christian understandings of Jews – and themselves. In almost every Catholic Cathedral the statue depicting the Church and Christians was of a woman – with everything in place – crown, scepter, sacred text – while the synagogue and Jews, also depicted as a woman, had everything askew. In addition the statue depicting Jews had her eyes covered – Jews were blind; they couldn't see the truth.

So the persecuting church was depicted as innocent; the persecuted Jews as guilty.

Check out Martin Luther's pamphlet – "On the Jews and Their Lies" – but then also page forward to the Dearborn Independent, the newspaper of Henry Ford and of Ford Motor Company – the same lies about Jews are printed there. They used to be distributed in Ford dealerships – perhaps even here in Abilene; it was mandatory.

Another tidbit from my Holocaust class that the students can't wrap their mind around: Hitler's favorite American was Henry Ford. Indeed, in the 1930s, Henry Ford travelled to Germany and was presented, by Hitler himself, the highest honor the Third Reich gave to those from other countries.

Read *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* by Neil Baldwin – it isn't light reading.

Yet another tidbit relating to the Holocaust. Did you know that IBM was there in Nazi Germany, cataloguing and calculating Jews, their geographical locations, transit situations, slave labor, health and death numbers - for the Nazis?

In fact, IBM made its initial fortune by computerizing America's Social Security system *and* the Nazis seizure and consolidation of power. IBM was so important that Hitler also honored IBM's president, Thomas Watson, in Germany.

The tattooed numbers on the death camp inmates – did you know that they were related to the IBM computerized systems?

Again, hardly light reading: If you are interested read *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance Between the Nazis and America's Most Powerful Corporation* by Edwin Black.

There are plenty of sins to go around; it isn't limited to Christians and Christianity.

Ford hated Jews – it wasn't specifically religious – though the groundwork was already there; it had been laid by Christianity. Hitler's hatred of Jews wasn't specifically religious either; the groundwork had been laid by Christianity.

Watson didn't seem to have anything against Jews – it was just profit.

Yet another tidbit from the Holocaust: The Holocaust was a profit-maker for many folks in many countries. When millions of Jews are forced from their homes and businesses throughout Europe, do you think there aren't many people benefitting from their economic losses?

On this see *Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933-1945* by Martin Dean.

## II

Are Jews exempt from hatred and injustice toward others?

As it turns out, not at all. Jews have had our beef against Christians and Christianity – in many ways it was and is justifiable. But the language was extreme. Christians were accused of all sorts of religious heresies; most often they were thought as pagans.

Even today I hear such accusations where I live – but mostly Christians are just thought less of. Jews have often felt and thought themselves superior. Don't we?

Over the years, Christianity blessed slavery and segregation and sometimes in the South, Jews did as well. In fact, Jews and Christians, once enemies, came together through a shared interest in segregation

and they can come together today through a joint opposition to others, say Muslims. Or opposition to Palestinians.

Christians can be racists. In the past – and now. Jews can be racists. In the past – and now. Muslims can be racist. In the past – and now.

We would like to think racism is incompatible with racism. We need to think again.

Just as my Christian students cannot believe Christians and Christianity can hate, most Jews don't believe that Jews and Judaism can hate.

Should it surprise us that many Muslims don't believe that Islam and Muslims can hate?

If you remember a few years ago - a Danish newspaper published cartoons depicting Islam and Mohammed as terrorists. All hell broke loose internationally. How dare anyone depict Mohammed as a terrorist?

Remember this is after September 11<sup>th</sup>, when many Jews and Christians depicted all Muslims as terrorists. Or possible terrorists.

I work with Muslim students; they use and even pray in my Center for Jewish Studies. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, they have felt under assault; they wanted to demonstrate that they aren't terrorists and Islam isn't terrorist either.

So we had an event – titled “The Danish Cartoon Controversy: Baylor Muslim Students Speak Out.”

The Muslim students were against the publishing of the cartoons. For them, Mohammed and Islam, as depicted, was a sacrilege.

They told our student body – the hall was packed with 3-400 students – that Islam was being misrepresented – that Islam is a religion of peace and harmony. So they told their own story. Fair enough.

If Christians were going to present Christianity as only good and innocent. And Jews present Judaism as only good and innocent. Why shouldn't Muslims present Islam in that way?

Presenting our religious identities as innocent is only part of the truth. But this doesn't mean that religion should be demonized.

Most interfaith encounters present each religion as innocent and good. Or, if not historically innocent and good, then at least today it is innocent and good.

But wouldn't it be more honest to say that historically and in the present, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been and are – beautiful - and awful - and everything in between?

Our difficulty in seeing our religious identities as good and flawed often makes our interfaith dialogue forums for hypocrisy, where we pat each other on the back. Wouldn't it be better if we all confessed

that the religion we hold dear is a road to truth and justice *and* to violence and injustice – and that we as Jews, Christians and Muslims must continually choose our path toward truth and justice?

If we are honest about our flawed past and present, we may be able to help each other choose our own path toward truth and justice. But we can't help each other toward that path if we aren't honest with ourselves and with each other.

The religions we hold so dear are deeply flawed – and it isn't just an aberrational flaw. There are flaws buried deep within each religious tradition – and if we don't have a critical sense and apply it to our own traditions we are destined to repeat what we find so reprehensible in history.

An example: On the one hand the Christian students I teach are not anti-Semitic; on the other hand they inherit a tradition that was anti-Semitic. Should I be silent about the history of anti-Semitism because the students aren't anti-Semitic? Or should I advise them of their past as a caution for the present?

Interesting in the Holocaust class, the most controversial subject isn't anti-Semitism. Once the students wake up to their own Christian history of anti-Semitism, they are willing to examine it. The most controversial subject in the Holocaust class is a subject only indirectly approached – slavery, segregation, racism in America. One subject leads to another: the student's issue may not be Jews in Nazi Germany – that is far enough away to be safe; the more difficult issue may be the history of the United States and African-Americans.

Another controversial topic is homosexuality – which I do discuss somewhat. After all, homosexuals were rounded up by the Nazis – as degenerates. While my Christian students wouldn't think of Jews in negative ways, they certainly can – and often do – think of Gays and Lesbians in that way.

What is closer is often more difficult.

On the other hand, some Jews want the Holocaust treated in a way that says that Jews can do no wrong. After all, we have been oppressed. But if we Jews rail against the oppression of Jews, shouldn't we be even more vigilant when we as Jews oppress others?

Here we enter the difficult terrain of Israel and the Palestinians – a very complex arena – but one which we as Jews should be quite concerned about in relation to our ethical values. Having been in Israel and Palestine many times and seen the many sides of the conflict, I certainly cannot remain silent. How can I speak about the suffering we Jews have experienced without also discussing the suffering that Palestinians are suffering at Jewish hands?

What is closer is often more difficult.

Now it is also true that when we say that Judaism, Christianity and Islam – and Jews, Christians and Muslims – are not only good and just, we also know that in every historical period there are Jews, Christians and Muslims that oppose injustice and violence. In this opposition, they often come into conflict with their co-religionists – who might be supporting injustice and violence.

There are Jews, Christians, Muslims who take Judaism, Christianity and Islam so seriously that they proclaim another way of being Jewish, Christian or Muslim – and sometimes suffer for it.

If there is a long history of injustice and violence among the world's religions, there is also a long history of those who oppose injustice and violence.

Does this opposition inform our religious identity and our interfaith discussions? Or do we celebrate it then, without understanding that it applies to us now?

Do we celebrate the prophets the prophetic understandings of Jesus and persecute the prophets in our midst?

### III

Shall we begin with the prophets?

Obviously we know about them; the original prophets are in our scriptures. The Hebrew Bible is full of prophetic figures – Aaron and Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel – we might even see Jesus as a Jewish prophet.

In fact we know them so well we often think – and act – as if the books of the prophets are closed. We read their confrontations with power – as past tense. But what would these prophets say to us – here and now - to our religious lives? Would they approve – religiously, politically, economically - of what we are about today?

It is important to note that the prophets came to their own people – the prophets of Israel spoke to the people Israel – and harshly too!

Often as not, the prophets spoke against the religion of Israel – at least as it was being practiced – and more – the prophets railed against how power, wielded by religious authorities, large and small, attached themselves to unjust political power – and how political power utilized religion for its own purposes – and how the people Israel were being duped by religious and political power into the major sin of the Hebrew Bible – idolatry.

How the people Israel would be judged by the kind of society it formed. How that society would be judged by how the least of Israel – the widow, the orphan and the stranger – was treated.

Now we read about this in churches and synagogues. We marvel about the arguments, the guts of the prophets and how they spoke so boldly – but then – do we apply this to our time, ourselves, our nation?

It might surprise you to think that some outside our borders and some inside our borders think of the United States as an empire, sometimes doing good in the world and sometimes not, but an empire

nonetheless. Should we take that into account when we think of what it means to be Jewish, Christian or Muslim?

There are other empires in the world – they can be large or small – like the former Soviet Union, China, Japan and Germany in former times – there are others who if given the chance would become empire – the desire for empire is part of the human condition – but the prophets and Jesus have much to say about empire, don't they?

The prophets are disturbers of Israel's peace – and our own.

In fact, if you read the prophets and apply them now, it is difficult to see how our religiosity can pass the test of the prophets. Most of us here tonight are well to do, well fed and very much concerned about our own and our family's security. Most else is secondary.

But there are others, prophets who are alive today, who question our own secure religiosity.

There are Jews of Conscience, Christians of Conscience and Muslims of Conscience – who challenge our security. In the name of God. And sometimes without the name of God, since the name of God is used so frequently and so easily, that they find the very mention of God hypocrisy, a conspiracy of silence.

Yes - those who can't name God – or who rail against God – carry God. Or the possibility of God. For us – those who believe in and name God so easily.

This raises the question of how we image God. The images of God we have. The content of those images. What needs to be critically addressed. Are our churches, synagogues and mosques repositories for God? Are these the places where one finds God?

On Sunday night I went to an event – at a bar – where a religious group meets – they call themselves the Void Collective.

If I might confess, my older son, Aaron, is one of the Jewish movers and shakers of the Void Collective. Earlier in the week, he was at a conference invited by a major Jewish literary critic and when he spoke critically of the state of Israel in relation to the global political and economic order, he wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms.

You see, Aaron, as a Jew, and some Christians in our area, can't find a hospitable place to worship God and carry on the prophetic call of justice, reconciliation and peace – at the same time.

They find that Jews and Christians often persecute them for their views, including their questions about God's presence.

So they formed their own – Void Collective. Because they want to be certain about God – and so question God's presence or absence.

So Aaron took to wearing a sandwich sign - GODISNOWHERE - which can be read one of two ways – God Is No Where – or God Is Now Here. Last Sunday, he took this sign and stood outside of First Baptist –

just stood there. He then went to other parts of Waco – and just stood there. In the park. At abandoned buildings. On street corners. Is God no where? Or now here?

What does it mean to proclaim – God is no where? What does it mean to proclaim – God is now here?

Can we proclaim God's presence without justice as the cornerstone?

## IV

So here it is – the nub of the question – about our religious identities – and about interfaith dialogue: Can those of us in the interfaith dialogue exist in peace and harmony – and we congratulate ourselves on this – while we and our religions bless a social order that the prophets would question boldly?

Jews and Christians in large part have buried the hatchet – and this is good. But what Jews and Christians have buried the hatchet – and do some Jews and Christians use the hatchet against other Jews and Christians?

We also have to ask ourselves if some Jews and Christians come together to find new enemies outside, say Muslims. Arabs. Other countries like Iraq or Iran. Cuba.

In our interfaith celebration, are we naïve about our own politics, thinking that we as Americans are always right, or almost always right, while other citizens of the world are always wrong, or almost always wrong?

There are other aspects that we need to deal with as well. Interfaith dialogue often means accepting at face value what Jews, Christians and Muslims – agreeing - in a civil way - to disagree. But what if the agreed upon belief systems – that we disagree upon – are not what separates us?

Example: For Jews and Christians, the agreed upon disagreement involves Jesus as the Christ. Christians accept Jesus as the Christ, Jews don't. By agreeing to disagree, we know where each other stands. Therefore we know where we stand – or we think we do.

But what if Aaron's sign "GOD is nowhere/God is here" – breaks down the agreed upon divisions and disturbs our new found peace and harmony? What if justice is more definitive of faith than faith creed and dogmatics?

Are we called to another level of faith searching?

Thus the interfaith deal: After millennia of distrust and hatred and bloodshed, Jews and Christians come together – and sometimes Muslims. This is good. It is revolutionary. But it can be another accommodation. It can be a false peace.

Or it can be another step toward a deeper sensibility, a deeper exploration?

The easiest thing to do is to accept peace – finally – as neighbors. But the Hebrew Bible and I think Jesus as well, ask us the most subversive questions: Who is our neighbor? Is the stranger our neighbor?

So God is no where – when there isn't justice; or now here in the pursuit of justice.

Or – Justice is no where – when there isn't justice; or now here in its very pursuit.

Reconciliation is no where – when reconciliation is in name only; or reconciliation is now here in its very pursuit.