

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF WOMEN

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Bien que la chrétienté soit encore au Canada la tradition religieuse prédominante, l'auteure remarque que la mosaïque religieuse canadienne est en pleine transformation: par le seul fait de leur nombre, les religions nouvelles remettent en cause l'hégémonie de la chrétienté. C'est pour cette raison que le dialogue entre religions devient important: il ne pourra cependant pas être réalisé si ne disparaissent pas les idées pré-conçues et les murs élevés par les religions pour se protéger. Les attitudes des femmes envers la religion varient tellement que ce dialogue est difficile pour elles: de nombreuses traditions religieuses ont en effet rendu leur rôle marginal, et beaucoup ont choisi de rejeter complètement la religion. Et pourtant notre expérience commune de femmes nous donne un terrain d'entente et un avantage certain. En participant à ce dialogue, les femmes assument un rôle actif dans l'évolution des traditions religieuses.

In Canada and throughout the world, religion is an all-pervasive force. It both forms and is formed by culture; it both supports and



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challenges society's norms and institutions. With its potential for repression and liberation, religion influences every aspect of our private and public lives. As individuals, even those of us who have rejected the religious tradition in which we were raised cannot escape its effects. In times of crisis, we may turn to that religious tradition for comfort; or, if we have chosen to follow a different religious path, we may find ourselves describing our new faith in juxtaposition with the old. As well, Canada's dominant religion is Christianity, and the forces that control our public lives reflect this fact. Abortion remains part of the Criminal Code, an Ontario Conservative government demands the recitation of the "Lord's Prayer" in public schools to encourage moral development, and the nuclear family persists as the normative lifestyle.

At this time in Canada's history, the religious mosaic is undergoing a radical transformation as new religions by their very numbers challenge Christianity's hegemony. Now, interaction between people

of different faiths no longer occurs only on a global scale and in the news. It is happening in our neighbourhoods and in our workplaces. Muslims outnumber Presbyterians in Toronto, and the number of people who give their faith as Buddhism has increased by 450 per cent since the last Canadian census. Japanese Buddhist churches, Korean United churches, and Chinese Catholic churches are a common sight and will remain so, for these national churches play an important role in sustaining religious and cultural identity.

As different ways of being and doing in the world increasingly become part of our everyday experience, we cannot attempt to understand them using parochial presumptions. We must not assume that we all govern our actions using the same normative criteria. For example, while socialization and dating among young people are acceptable activities for some, for many Muslims the mixing of the sexes is unacceptable behaviour. Likewise, we must be aware that those who share our values may do so for reasons different

from our own. This means that while most people take it for granted that Judaism and Christianity have a great deal in common, this assumption must be carefully examined. Christianity and Judaism do share in part a common religious literary heritage. Misconceptions arise when it is presumed that the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament carry the same message for Jews and Christians.

Most of us harbour many false assumptions about people and their faiths. It is in the attempts to go beyond these that the challenge and potential of dialogue exist.

To proceed, we are required to acknowledge and to break down the walls of religious exclusiveness which religions have built to protect themselves. For Christians, this means a re-evaluation of Christology and the missionary aggressiveness of their tradition. For immigrants, the situation is more complex. They must juggle the need to preserve their religious traditions in an alien Canadian environment with the desire to be a part of a multireligious reality.

It is obstacles such as these that render interfaith dialogue among women so difficult. Moreover, on a personal level, many women's attitudes toward religion vary markedly. For some, it is one of unquestioning acceptance. For others, acknowledging the oppressive nature of the tradition results in attempts to bring about its transformation. Many have found that the religion of their childhood has lost all meaning. So they struggle either to create a life where institutionalized religion has no part or to find an alternative religious tradition which will nourish them. Still other women search for the Goddess.

Indeed, many religious traditions, if not all, marginalize women with articles of faith which are so blatantly misogynistic that many women have chosen to reject religion altogether. However, since Canadian society is so heterogeneous, the culture and non-theological basis for many of those old norms and values, which allow misogynist views to thrive, now

lack majority support. This is part of the broader changes brought about in the wake of women continuing to question their status and role in society at large.

It is this process which currently gives women the creative advantage in interfaith dialogue. When women with different faith experiences gathered in Copenhagen for the Mid-Decade Conference on Women and at the recent World Council of Churches meeting in Vancouver, they realized once again that while theologies and ideologies, culture and class continue to divide them, their experiences as women in the world gave them a common ground on which to stand. When religious walls that divide us seem impenetrable, this shared reality opens the possibilities of communication for us in a way not available to men.

This does not mean that there is no place for authentic religious witness in dialogue. On the contrary, when done without dogmatism and apologetics, it is an essential part of the process. Only through witness can we begin to develop an understanding of another person's faith from the outside which agrees with her understanding from within. For this kind of deep and meaningful dialogue to occur, however, a space must be created in which we feel that we

can be open enough to offer our most intimate experiences. Especially among women, we expect to be truly heard. But we also expect to be challenged and our attitudes transformed.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of interfaith dialogue among women lies in its virtual spontaneity. Part of this spontaneity arises from the unrestricted format in which many encounters occur on a daily basis. At this level of interaction neither dogmatic constraints nor misleading pretensions jeopardize the exchange of ideas. And it is this very exchange of ideas which constitutes dialogue.

Most acknowledge that women have long performed a significant role in preserving the continuity of religious tradition. It must now be recognized that we are also assuming an active role in its evolution. In order to meet the responsibility incumbent with this new challenge, we must explore to the fullest the potential found in dialogue.

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