

Rabbi Jackie Tabick, chair of World Congress of Faiths.

Speech to Interdependence Day talk at the House of Lords, September 12, 2011.

Selection of notes taken by Robin Llewellyn

“I would like to start with quoting from a midrash, which is the word we use for a Rabbinic teaching drawn from the Bible. It’s a midrash that was taught around 2000 years ago, so it’s been around a bit. The Rabbi said:

‘How great is the Holy Blessed One. When a king of flesh and blood imprints the coin of his realm with his image, each coin is exactly the same - indeed it is a problem if it isn’t, but when the Holy Blessed One imprints each human on this earth with the divine image then all of us are different, individual, unique, and God rejoices that it is so.’

We are meeting today of course with the memories of two terrible events in our minds. Such scenes of such brutality and violence, the results of base hatred can be seen too often on our screens. On one level of course the perpetrators were very different people from different worlds, yet on another level they are linked by a troublesome and vile ideology: that they can impose their beliefs on other people, whatever violent way that they like, and that their respective religions could be used to justify their wicked acts.

Unfortunately we all know too well that religions can be stilted by manipulation, by wicked so called religious leaders, to justify hatred and brutality and bring death and destruction to our society. The aim of all interfaith groups must be to combat such intolerance and prejudice.

In the World Congress of Faiths, we treasure both cultural and religious diversity, because after all, one of the major facets of multiculturalism is the bonus of having religious diversity in our country. We believe that each religion brings its own טעם, the Hebrew word for taste. We encourage the delving into the philosophy, the teachings of our own faiths, to a deeper and deeper level, so we can bring what is important to our different faiths to our discussions. But we do acknowledge what our founder, Francis Youngusband called ‘the deep fellowship that exists between adherents of different faiths. A unity that binds all believers in a mystic bond.’ I’m a Jew, I believe strongly in the one God and the unity of creation. But the fact that I’m an active and some would say professional Jew does not blind me to the truths and religious teachings that other faiths bring to this world, and as a Jew, I personally hate the word ‘toleration’; I’m much happier when others are prepared to *celebrate* difference of religion. And I’d like to share with you the teaching of a scholar called David Zeller, who used to teach in Jerusalem, and he uses Jewish imagery to explore this point, this mystical idea:

He describes the process of spirituality as an inward journey to seek the oneness of life and soul that we knew when we were in the Garden of Eden, before we ate of the tree of knowledge. He said that because through our studies we can only gain some necessarily incomplete knowledge of the material, scientific world, we have forgotten that the world is one. But he maintained that the Garden of Eden still

exists in our world, a place where it's possible to experience deep, real, spiritual joy, but we no longer see the Garden because our limited and superficial understanding of knowledge that we gained tends to split up the world, not to unite it. So the aim of spirituality as he taught it is a humbling of the self, so that we can grow into an awareness of being part of a bigger pattern, and then break through the limits we place on ourselves and the way we relate to each other.

This teaching of course relates to the knowledge that we are now being given by the environmentalists that the world really is one, and that we have to respond to the unity of that world and the people in it or perish.

There are many different cultures, many different ways, but one deep religious unity behind it all. There can be no doubt that the work of such organisations as the Interdependence Movement and indeed the many and varied interfaith groups is vital to our world. A world which seems on one level to be so interconnected, at least technologically, yet paradoxically remains so fragmented, when the important values of life, peace, and social justice are under consideration. Indeed the internet, twitters, mobiles, that can be so helpful in making and entertaining ties of family and friendship are used extensively by some to spread lies and hatred about the other, which all of us have I suspect experienced at some time or another. Our interconnectedness can be a double-edged sword.

But while we are remembering those base acts, so also must our hearts be uplifted by the creation of so many groups such as this one, joining together to fight ignorance and bigotry. And in Norway itself I must say I was incredibly moved to watch, just after the event, peoples of different religions entering Oslo Cathedral together to express their solidarity with the injured and the bereaved.

I must admit that as a cook and as an eater I prefer a wonderful mixed salad to a rather boring melting pot. We can be different and still contribute to the society in which we live. Any other approach to society would be harmful, would be destructive, and would be just plain boring."