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## ***Across Purposes***

### **Howard Grace on bridge building and shared humanity**

#### **‘When we literalise metaphor, problems arise.’**

The desire to be a bridge-builder has grown in me in recent years. When you look at the present-day world, it is quite clear that bringing conflicting gaps, and trust-building, is an overarching need. This is true within and between religions as well as areas of life like politics.

In 2013, I helped to produce a film *Beyond Forgiving* and got to know the protagonists, Letlapa Mphahlele and Ginn Fourie. Their stories enhanced my conviction. Letlapa, a commander of the military wing of the Pan Africanist Congress during apartheid South Africa, ordered retaliatory massacres on white civilians. Ginn, the mother of one of the victims (Lyndi, a twenty-three-year-old university student killed in Cape Town), later forgave Letlapa. What brought together a white female Christian and a black male atheist in common cause, after such a horrific experience?

My colleague Imad Karam directed the film. Imad, a Palestinian Muslim from Gaza, says that a primary problem in his part of the world is that Palestinians and Israelis are both trapped in their own narratives. I'm sure that this entrapment is true for so many situations, whether that's international strife, religious affiliations, personal relationships or even football team allegiances. As a way forward, Imad highlights the value of really living into each other's lives – of 'walking a mile in the moccasins of the other', as the saying goes. But additional to that is the importance of bringing our own contributions - seeking a shared vision, which all can buy into.

A recent newspaper headline quoted a man who, at great risk to himself, jumped into the sea to rescue a drowning girl. The headline stated, *'It was totally instinct, there was no thinking about it.'* It seems to me, that impulses like compassion seem to come from an innate instinct in our human hearts. This has also been apparent in the Covid pandemic. Those who work for the National Health Service or in caring professions are also a really mixed bunch. I suspect that most people are responding to the pandemic out of a basic human instinct, irrespective of beliefs about where this originates.

Let us consider religion, with an analogy. Consider the typical two-dimensional world map such as the one below. These are usually centred on Spain. Before looking at the next page, ask yourself which is bigger: Africa or Greenland?



John Hick (former vice-president of the World Congress of Faiths) writes:

“Concerning the different, and often conflicting, belief systems of the religions: our earth is a three-dimensional globe. But when you map it on a two-dimensional surface, such as a piece of paper, you have to distort it. You cannot get three dimensions into two without distortion. But if a map made in one projection is correct it does not follow that maps made in other projections are incorrect. If they are properly made they are all correct, and yet they all distort. Perhaps our different theologies, both within the same religion and between different religions, are human maps of the infinite divine reality made in different projections. These all necessarily distort, but perhaps all (in different settings) are equally useful in enabling us make our journey through life.”

In fact, Africa is 14 times the area of Greenland. Different maps, such as the Gall-Peters projection (often used in international development), show this more clearly. But, when thinking about the Divine we aren't just thinking of going from three dimensions to two. We are thinking about dimensions far beyond our own. The reality behind the word 'God' is beyond religion, just as it is beyond science. The US physicist Henry Stamp expresses this from a scientific angle. *“The most fundamental processes of nature lie outside of space-time, but generate events that can be located within space-time.”*

Thus, on the scientific front, present day cosmologists talk about dark matter and dark energy, because of effects on our visible universe. But, just like concepts of the Divine, these too are beyond our current human comprehension.

From the religious standpoint, we use metaphor. For instance, in the Christian tradition, Psalm 18 says: *“The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer. ... He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”* God is clearly not literally these things, in the same way as she is not a literal 'Father'. But these are all helpful metaphors in certain contexts.

J.B.S. Haldane, the mathematical biologist of Scottish descent, wrote that: “My suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose but queerer than we *can* suppose.” If this is true, and therefore also of the Divine, I ask myself, “What are the implications for our human family?”

From this perspective, we are all reaching out for a reality which is beyond our present human comprehension. But, when we literalise metaphor, problems arise. Our vision becomes blinkered.

In 2018, my friend Letlapa wrote an article in *Progressive Voices* (the quarterly magazine of the Progressive Christianity Network). In his final paragraph, he said: *‘Beyond prejudices we inherited from our forebears, across the fences and walls we erect around ourselves, across doctrines and dogmas we uphold, perhaps it helps to acknowledge that there's a thread that runs through all the ideologies and all the schools of thought: common humanity. And if we recognise humanity in others, no matter how different from us they look and dress and talk and worship, we'll be nourishing and watering the roots of our own humanity. Is this a vision that can unite atheists like myself with a variety of religious believers where we come together for a greater "Yes" - the reality of a shared humanity.’*

I see that as a challenge to us. A lot has transpired on the Inter Faith front. But, could it be that the next move forward is to see 'believers' vs 'non-believers' as a false dividing line, and explore the more fundamental commonalities that these have? To me, being a Quaker is not about beliefs but fostering, together, the heart of our shared humanity.

Howard Grace is from Newbury Meeting. Sept 2021.