

From tolerance to inclusion

AHMED ZAOUÏ

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It is an honour and a privilege to speak with you today. Thank you for your invitation and for the many ways you have welcomed and supported me since I arrived in New Zealand. I think back to just over one year ago when a public meeting was held in this Church to commemorate one year since I was granted refugee status. I was very touched to see the photos of the meeting and the procession to the prison. As a Muslim and a scholar of religion, it was particularly heartening to have received such support from a church. It reminds me that, despite these difficult times, there are many bonds between religious communities that we should celebrate and affirm.

As 'children of the book', we have a strong common heritage and many shared values. Despite differences in ritual and practice, our religions strive, through worship, to improve people's lives. Our religions, at their essence, understand the value of tolerance. According to the Koran, Muslims must respect and refrain from arguing with followers of earlier revelations, "...for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we all surrender ourselves", and show respect for other religions and protect places of worship, "mosques, churches, synagogues, where the name of God is mentioned". As both our religions affirm, we are all equal before God and thus it is not up to us to judge each other. In Matthew 7:1 it was said "Do not judge and criticise and condemn others, so that you may not be judged and criticised and condemned yourselves". It is only for God to judge all of us on the common standard of the quality of our actions. As said in the Koran, "Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you."

We can, and we should, draw much hope from our common heritage. The question we must ask is this – what practical steps can we take to sustain this hope by building on this common heritage? A few months ago, delivering an address to the Quakers, I emphasised the need for open and informed dialogue between people of different religions. Reflecting on that address today, I would go one step further. In a practical sense, while dialogue is clearly necessary, it tends to take place between those who are already convinced of the need for dialogue. And 'dialogue' itself seems to mean a rather serious and intellectual process which is reserved to the old and wise! When reflecting on the best way to build bonds between communities, perhaps we should consider how we create

cohesion within communities - through, for example, education and sport, play and laughter.

A few days ago, I came across a quote by a Native American author, Nani Aki Linder, in which she rejects the discourse of 'tolerance':

I am of the opinion that inclusion could replace the word tolerance. Why? Inclusion means that "I can", versus tolerance, meaning you have to put up with me which breeds more resentment. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be tolerated. I want inclusion, to join in partnership with you to enhance our world, city, and community. I want our children together to find the value in seeing everyone worthy of living their values, accepting responsibility, learning to trust and thriving in respect, side by side in joyful common ground.

What does it mean to move from tolerance to inclusion, to move beyond 'dialogue' to a warmer and closer type of connection? It means, for one thing, that we give priority to making sure that our young know each other, that they understand each other's faiths, that they play together. When I was in Switzerland, my two oldest children attended a public school and participated in the religious classes on Christianity. Some people asked me whether I was troubled that my children were learning about Christianity. I replied that, in contrast, I was happy! My children will become more understanding about Christianity and their classmates more understanding about Islam.

Our hope is with the young, and it is our responsibility to foster this hope and do all we can to ensure that the next generation is mercifully free from the suspicions and prejudices that we may still hold. Let us do more than tolerate. Let us include each other and celebrate our essential unity under God.

Salaam Aleikum, peace be upon you.