

I am convinced that RIFF and others engaged in interfaith dialog are a major counter to fundamentalism and terrorism, yet in the back of my mind I am also thinking ‘but how do we differ from a terrorist?’

Anthropologist Scott Atran and his colleagues have spent the last 2 years interviewing Islamic State group fighters and their opponents on the front lines. He has developed deep ideas of ‘sacred values’, values that cannot be abandoned or exchanged for material gain, often strongly emotional and religious in nature. The terrorist fuses identity with that of the group and carries great influence, sacred values give an individual spiritual strength that counts for far more than physical strength. Sacred values trump a powerful group identity. Individuals with ideals ‘sacred values’ as best understood as ‘devoted actors’ not as ‘rational actors’

So now consider in our personal faith - Are there things we hold dear, which almost automatically excite our emotions, for which we would make the costliest of sacrifices, which are non-negotiable. Indarjit Singh talked about his ‘fundamental’ values in his article in reply to police enquiries

What are these sacred values for us personally. How lightly, or how tightly, do we hold our values?

Are we able to separate the superstition, ritual, culture and group history of our particular faith from the axiomatic ethical teachings of our faith.

When we talk about these axiomatic faith statements, are we willing to acknowledge that others could use different language to describe a similar axiom and accept their language as an equally powerful normative statement – in other words can we reveal our foundations to others who may think about it in a different way and not be bruised by the encounter? For me this is the heart of the difficulty of inter-faith dialog.

As an example, consider how we understand ‘God’,

Indarjit Singh challenges (rightly so in my view) religious sentiments that imply god favours one faith over another. How could this be a path to deep communal interfaith understanding – how could we possibly answer questions like:

Is my God better than yours?

Is my god the only god? – all others are imposters!

Are there multiple gods, partitioned by the religious denominations that worship them?

Do these multiple gods talk to one another?

If they do what do they talk about?

To my mind ridiculous questions!

My God is a very personal idea rooted in an understanding of ‘that of god in everyone’ from Quaker practice – that god is contained in all of us, that god in its totality could be the summation of all the gods in each of us across all of time (though I am not sure this helps understanding)

My understanding of ideas of God in other faiths and maybe none is that God represents perfection, the unknowable, the unprovable, a presence beyond our physical world, the creator.

The idea of that of God in everyone is widely held although I am not clear if this a reflection of god as an external idea – bringing to mind the parable of the blind men and an elephant that originated in ancient Indian subcontinent.

It is a story of a group of blind men, who have never come across an elephant before, learn and conceptualize what the elephant is like by touching it. Each blind man feels a different part of the elephant body, but only one part, such as the side or the tusk. They then describe the elephant based on their partial experience and their descriptions are in complete disagreement on what an elephant is. In some versions they come to suspect that the other person is dishonest and they come to blows. The moral of the parable is that humans have a tendency to project their partial experiences as the whole truth, ignore other people's partial experiences, and one should consider that one may be partially right and may have partial information about us. We can all see a bit of god but we struggle to put all the ideas together in a coherent holistic vision.

Indarjit Singh quotes Guru Nanak to tell us that “the one God of us all is not in the least bit interested in our different religious labels but in what we do to serve our fellow beings”.

Do we accept the fundamental equality of all religions even though we don't share a common viewpoint? Or do we group religions into those for which we can define a common viewpoint and all the others who in some way are 'inferior'?

Given that in the UK at least, less than 50% of people identify with any religion, how do we include the secular society in this discussion – it can't be right that these fundamental existential axioms of ethics are reserved only for those who identify with a faith. So maybe our bigger challenge is not to refine common understanding for faith but a common understanding across humanity.

As an alternative approach, can we find sayings from eminent widely respected sources that we all accept? Is that an 'easier' way to establish common understanding.?

I come back to my original question – if we cannot accept (no doubt following deeply committed and sincere discussion) other descriptions and interpretations of our personal ethical axioms, we have only two choices, dump them or fight for them. Are they 'sacred values' and am I a 'devoted actor' as Scott Atran describes the terrorist mindset?

I suggest that for a powerful interfaith group we have to be willing to face these difficult ideas and try with our limited language and non-professional understanding to endeavour to converge on common ideals, strip away the ritual and cultural baggage, use language we all understand and as far as we can tell understand in the same way. Maybe this requires a rather pernicity attitude but without it how can we be sure we are actually talking about the same thing?

At the end of the day when we have stripped all the rhetoric away, do we all worship the same God – described by these shared faith axioms? Ultimately could we imagine a future in which all religions worship the same God and agree about it?

If we cannot follow through this intellectual process, and maybe some will find it too challenging, then can we fall back on our set of shared statements, and actions that we all can support for their fundamentally humanitarian value? So in that case we need to start thinking about what actions can we share. After all as humans we are 'doing' creatures we have only a limited tolerance of intellectual and philosophical work – as is very well illuminated in the Baga Gita, Quaker Faith and Practice, The Bible .....

Ultimately interfaith is more than just being superficially nice to each other, we have to challenge and accept in a spirit of humility each of us does not know all the answers, we do not have a monopoly on truth; the best we can do is to clarify and understand all the little pieces of truth – that of God in everyone- in the hope and anticipation that the whole is much greater than the parts.