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# Opening Doors, Building Bridges

An Address by the Revd Canon Dr Samuel Wells at the Divan Cultural Center September 26 2006

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Our subject this evening is 'Opening Doors, Building Bridges'. I want therefore to divide my remarks into two parts. I shall start by talking a little bit about what it might mean to open doors in interfaith dialogue. And then I shall go on to talk about what it might mean to build bridges in the way we conduct such dialogue here in the Triangle.

## Opening Doors

I want to begin by looking a little more closely at our motivations for being a part of this conversation. Three come immediately to mind, and I want to suggest which one of these stands out. One is, we may subscribe to the notion that there is a common core that we all share. That core may go under the name of religion, or it may be more broadly be described as humanity, or civilization, or consciousness. It may, for some of us, be more narrowly defined in language such as the 'three Abrahamic faiths' – referring to Islam, Judaism and Christianity. On this view the more we talk with one another, the closer we get to the one thing we are all searching for.

A second, and very fashionable, view, is that we have to talk to one another or we shall all end up killing each other. This is not just a reference to events that are very much in the imaginations of all of us in recent months and years. This is in light of the widespread assumption, embedded in European and North Atlantic culture at least since the seventeenth century, that religion and violence are inherently linked. I often say to our 26 religious life groups at Duke that the way we relate to each other as friends and respectful colleagues across religious boundaries is our witness to the campus that that 350 year old story is not true – in other words that religion and violence are not inherently linked.

I want to commend to you a third, and apparently more modest, motivation for being part of a conversation like the one we are having. It is simply for people of historic faith traditions to be profoundly enriched by the gifts that come from the stranger. This is my understanding of what we are doing together this evening. I am here because I believe I have a great deal to learn from you. That is what my tradition teaches me. What I learn in my tradition is that I depend first of all on God and secondarily on the community of faith; but I also depend on the stranger. Let me give some examples.

Israel's life in what Christians call the Old Testament was characterized by its care not only of the orphan and the widow – but also of the alien. Over and over again the stranger is a gift to the people of God. It is Melchizedek that brings out bread and wine and blesses Abraham. It is Pharaoh whose 'fat cows' sustain Jacob's family in times of hardship. It is Balaam that blesses Israel in the sight of her enemy Balak. It is Ruth that demonstrates the faithfulness and imagination that Israel will need under her descendant David. It is Achish of Gath that gives a safe home to David and his followers when they are pursued by Saul. It is the Queen of Sheba that gives independent testimony to the wisdom and prosperity of Solomon. It is Cyrus that opens the way for the Jews to return from Exile. Israel depends on these strangers. Strangers are not simply a threat. They are not all characterized by the hard-hearted hostility of Moses' Pharaoh, of Goliath of Gath, of Sennacherib of Assyria and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Time and again strangers are the hands and feet of God, rescuing, restoring and reminding Israel as elsewhere God does himself.

Likewise Jesus and the early Church discover faith and mercy amongst strangers. On meeting the centurion whose servant he is asked to heal, Jesus says, 'In no one in Israel have I found such faith'. It is the Samaritan leper that is the only one of the ten healed that turns back to praise God and thank Jesus. Finding the resilience and devotion of the Cannanite woman who seeks healing for her daughter, Jesus similarly says 'Woman, great is your faith!' It is Cornelius whose visit from an angel pushes the Church into revising its understanding of Gentile faith. And it is in the Samaritan that Jesus tells his followers that they should see the model of a good neighbor.

The stranger is a gift to the Church, not a burden on it. As all the scriptural examples demonstrate, the stranger represents the hand of God, becoming present in the Church to rescue, restore and remind. The stranger is not the harbinger of scarcity but the sacrament of abundance – not the drainer of resources but the bringer of gifts. Caring for and conversing with the stranger, sharing food and offering friendship, is not a matter of altruism: it is done in the simple trust that this person has something precious that will sustain or build up the life of the community, even if that gift is slow to be revealed or hard to receive. This is the stone that the builders rejected: but it is destined to become the cornerstone. This is the crucified one: but it will be the one gloriously resurrected.

My wife and I had our honeymoon in Morocco and took a camel ride out into the Sahara desert. Our guide was a local Muslim man. When we reached the viewpoint we got out our cameras and posed in front of the scene from various angles. Just as we began to think about moving on we realized that our guide had not been visible for some time. Walking around a corner we spotted him, semi-prostrate, making his prayerful oblation to God. We were humbled, realizing how we and he had respectively spent the previous 15 minutes. Our response to the glory of God had been to take photographs; his had been to kneel down and pray. When we returned home we shared with our congregation a prayer that we had found helpful, which went ‘If I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then deny me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone’. Our congregation took readily to the prayer, and some asked its origin. When they discovered it was a Muslim prayer, there was some confusion. But we pointed out that just as our guide had been a gift to us in jolting our own spiritual complacency, so this prayer could similarly be a gift, perhaps dispelling some ignorance and prejudice about Islam.

## Building Bridges

I want to speak a little more briefly about what it might mean to build bridges in interfaith conversations here in the Triangle. The leader of my own (Anglican) denomination within Christianity, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, said in his enthronement sermon in 2003 words that went something like this: ‘You may be at a time in your spiritual life where your faith in God or sense of closeness to God’s ways is thin and dry. If so, go and find someone for whom faith is alive and full of joy, and spend some time living and being alongside them: and as likely as not you will find that person is from a more socially-disadvantaged part of your community.’

I find these to be words of deep wisdom. There may come a time when our individual sense of clarity or joy about our respective faiths is weak and troublesome, and there may be a time when our sense of hope for the interfaith enterprise is thin and dry. If so, we need to spend time alongside those for whom faith in general and faith in interfaith dialogue in particular is lively and overflowing. And as likely as not those people will not be where one would expect to find such conversations, in a religion department of a university or a divinity school or among leaders of the major faith traditions; as likely as not that will be among some of the most socially disadvantaged people of the Triangle.

And that’s why I would direct our attention to some of the groups that already practice the kind of interaction that I am preaching. I’m thinking of organizations like the Interfaith Hospitality Network which concentrates on meeting practical needs in a spirit of dignity and friendship. It doesn’t make interfaith dialogue the main course of the meal, so to speak, but it creates conversations of trust and mutual appreciation in which such conversations naturally arise. I’m thinking of the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham, which among other things organizes vigils for every homicide victim in the city of Durham. Here again is a place where we are gathered together by grief and anger and fear and shame, and we need all the wisdom and insight we can find from one another to bring about healing and peace and reconciliation. And I’m thinking of the groups that gather together to support prisoners emerging from penitentiaries and seeking to build solid foundations that help them live a new life within the law. Here, and in numerous twelve-step programs, people can bring wisdom and understanding from different faith traditions to a situation where people have acknowledged they need all the help they can get.

## Final Words

I don't know if there is an overarching phenomenon called 'religion' that everyone here tonight has in common. I don't think I really need to know. What has brought me here tonight is the conviction that I have a great deal to learn from everyone else here. My sense is that I and others are more likely to learn from people of other traditions if I make it clear that I am a person in need. I am a person who would like to learn better how to pray, how to live a disciplined life, how to fast, how to meditate, how to be a gracious presence in the life of my neighbour. And I represent a tradition that needs to learn how to bring people of different races together, how to hold diverse opinion within one body, how to break our addiction to violence, how to use power to set people free. These are things I personally and the tradition I represent have to learn. That's why I'm here. I'm here because I believe that God shows me things through people like you. Thank you for being messengers of God to one another and to me.