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The connections start here

Joan Chittister | Mar. 5, 2009 From Where I Stand

One thing is for sure: I never in my life expected to be in an interfaith meeting like the one that ended in Switzerland Feb. 26. After all, I grew up in a world in which every religious denomination was very, very sure of its uniqueness, its absolute monopoly on truth, its special status, its need to protect itself against heretics and infidels, against indifferentism and syncretism, against the great and wild "others." Whoever they might be. And those lines, one did not cross.

Then World War I and World War II, global business and globalization, the League of Nations and the United Nations, the G-8, the G-7, the G-20, and the European Union began to spring up everywhere. Fences came down everywhere. Borders ceased to exist. The world had, indeed, become a village. China was a day trip. Apartheid and genocide and nuclearization and the loss of the rain forests became local issues.

But not religion. Religion tended to cling to the local turf with all its claims of total truth and total privilege. There were, after all, issues yet unresolved. Slavery and the Holocaust, for instance, with all the theological overtones triggered by each. Or the crusades. Or colonialism with its inclination to convert Jews, Moslems and Native Americans at the end of a sword. Divisions along these lines were bitter and deep, theological and cast in God-talk: a lethal brew.

Nevertheless, the new realities of pluralism were outrunning the long-time dominance of past religious confines. The religious geography of the world was seeping across national boundaries just as surely as had its political and economic counterparts.

Signs of religious bonding began to emerge -- quietly, tentatively -- everywhere. Among others: After a 100 year hiatus, the Parliament of Religion held its second international gathering, and then its third and its fourth and now, soon, its fifth. The World Council of Churches reached out across denominations to organize the Christian world for the sake of the global community. Vatican II, Roman Catholicism's move into the 20th century after 400 years of parochial isolation, published a document on the church's relationship with both Christian and non-Christian religions that would open dialogue among the faiths for years to come. And, in 1986, Pope John Paul II's call for a Day of Prayer in Assisi, Italy, among the leaders of all the great faith traditions on the planet, gave world religion a human face and its praying selves a common bond.

All of those, of course, were "official" -- and therefore cautious -- forays into the ecclesiastical world. Fueled by the communication revolution as surely as the printing press upended religion before it. However, another impulse was afoot.

Several months ago, TED, a program launched in 1984 for the collection and pursuit of new ideas in science, business and the arts, gave its Make A Wish award to Karen Armstrong. (TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design.) Armstrong's wish, after years of religious scholarship and writing, was that TED would help create a universal charter for compassion among all the major religions of the world -- Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (See **Armstrong's TED speech** [1].)

Then technology -- the value of which we judge as either a new creation or the end of the world, depending on the day we judge it -- took over.

TED, originally begun to concentrate on new ideas in technology, education and design, built a Web site that invited people all over the world, in multiple languages, out of every perspective, to contribute ideas for the charter and to evaluate these statements for power, impact and inspirational effect. This may, in fact, be the first example of a universally created document in the history of the world.

And that's where the meeting in Switzerland came in. Having built a Web site that gathered the responses of people from all these traditions from one end of the planet to the other, TED gathered a "Council of Sages," made up of scholars and religious leaders, to review the ideas and mold them into their final form.

Never had I seen a mixed council of people like this work on a single document, together pouring out the ideals dearest to them about the very foundations of their faiths, in one group. They were Islamic scholars, a Hindu and a Christian nun, a Christian bishop and an ordained clergywoman, Jewish rabbis and even a Grand Mufti from Egypt. (See **Council of Sages** [2].)

And what happened? At the end of the day, they all discovered that their separate religions had formed them well. Compassion, they agreed, is the universal in each of our faiths, the glue meant to hold the world together.

Compassion, the Council said, is not pity since pity assumes superiority. Compassion is not an idea, it is an action that lifts the burden of the other because the other is of us. It is the determination to end the suffering of the other by spending oneself to do it. Compassion is fundamental to every faith and more urgently needed now more than ever. When whole people can be held hostage to robotized weapons of war and the kinds of "religious commitment" that makes the slaughter of innocents a holy act, compassion is needed.

But the purpose of the Charter is not to publish one more document. It's purpose is to create a movement that not only binds humanity together around the Golden Rule but provides a world-wide antidote to the use of religion in the justification of violence.

The work is nothing less than the attempt to create a common movement among Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus to delegitimize the use of religion as a technique of either state or personal violence. There will be public launch sites named, plaques raised, posters printed, the signatures of 1,000 major religious leaders gathered, and people everywhere engaged to be part of one great cry for Compassion.

As TED puts it on the Charter's website:

The Charter will change the tenor of the conversation around religion. It will be a clarion call to the world. The Charter will show that the voice of negativity and violence so often associated with religion is the minority and that the voice of compassion is the majority.

From where I stand, it's clear that religious people everywhere are trying to do what their own official leadership has failed to do in both church and state because what we've been doing, even as religions, is not working anymore.

If I were you, I'd follow this movement closely. Get a copy of the charter; distribute it; mount and display the plaque, spread the Web site; change the world. The change has to start somewhere, and it's obviously not going to start at the top. That leaves us.

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[1] http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion.html
[2] http://charterforcompassion.org