

Ubuntu as an antidote in a world of hate

By Tali Feinberg

“Time and again in recent years we have been reminded that religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become – mute, marginal and mild. No, religion is a fire and like a fire it warms and also burns. And we are guardians of the flame.”

These are the words of Mickey Glass (founding member of the Western Cape Religious Leader’s Forum and former Executive Director of the United Orthodox Synagogues Cape Council), who was speaking at a panel discussion hosted by the Cape SA Jewish Board of Deputies during UN World Interfaith Harmony Week. This was the third year in a row that the Cape Board had created a function to encourage and grow interfaith in Cape Town

The Cape Board aims to encourage dialogue and create connections in South Africa society, and thus panellists were asked to address the topic ‘The challenges of interfaith in a world of hate: Can we do more to promote ubuntu?’

This discussion as relevant as ever as we see almost daily crimes committed in the name of religion around the globe; from the ISIS executions of hostages to the Boko Haram massacres and to the terrorist attacks in France and Sydney.

In the face of these overwhelming challenges, “we do not have to redeem the world in one go,” continued Mickey Glass. “We do it one day at a time, one person at a time, one act at a time. A single life, our sages teach us is like a universe. Change a life and you change the world. We call it Tikkun Olam, mending the world. After all, the Jewish prophets introduced mankind to the whole concept of human rights.”

Most Reverend Archbishop Stephen Brislin, The Catholic Archbishop of Cape Town, agreed that much of the conflict worldwide is fuelled by faith, and put forward three reasons why he thinks this is so: fear, secularism and an unwillingness to speak out against injustice. He said that all of these breed a culture of mistrust and ‘othering’; for example, a rise of secularism leads to the satirising of religion, which in turn has led to an unjustified backlash, as in the case of the Charlie Hebdo attack.

He said that it is crucial that religious communities “denounce extremists who breach the values of our faith”, and also emphasised that they must be courageous enough to critique government if needed – “a prophet or priest does not try to be king – our role is to guide those in power,” he said.

Berry Gargan of the United Religions Initiative emphasised that faith communities need to be creative in order to build bridges in today’s world. She shared more about her organisation’s work, which brings people from different faith group together to tackle a problem in their community.

“People of faith often share a space, whether it is a home or city, and we need to start with what we have in common,” she said. Adding to Mickey Glass’ idea of religion as a flame, she said that she sees these ‘cooperation circles’ as “points of light, coming together and igniting more points of light in a dark world.”

Muhittin Camblibel, the Regional Director of the Turquoise Harmony Institute (its slogan is *So We May Know Each Other*) described the complexities of working in faith communities in places like

Turkey, where the society is both very religious and very secular. He commended the excellent interfaith work in Cape Town, a feat not always repeated in other parts of the country. Emphasising that “dialogue is the goal,” he encouraged simple gestures, like people to eat a meal together – “I’ll do the cooking!” he quipped.

Reverend Gordon Oliver (Chairman of the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative), put forward his vision of interfaith and its potential in the future. He shared the words of the late John Oliver, who said the question should not be “am I my brother’s keeper?” but rather “am I my brother?”

In this vein, he discussed a version of interfaith that echoes the values of ubuntu, which is the idea of ‘I am who I am because of you’ and where “interfaith can be a new spiritual path in an anxious, insecure world on a threatened planet.” Quoting Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, he emphasised that the values we should uphold is the “dignity of difference.”

The audience included members of the Ahmadi, Anglican, Baha’i, Brahma Kumaris, Catholic, Dutch Reformed Church, Jewish, Quaker, Shiite, Spiritualist, Sunni and the Turkish Muslim and Unitarian faith communities. Interfaith organisations present included the Western Cape Religious Leader’s Forum, Cape Town Interfaith Initiative, United Religions Initiative, Hizmet (‘Service’) Movement of Fethullah Gülen, the Korean Heavenly Culture, World Peace Restoration of Light (HWPL) and its International Women’s Peace Group and International Peace Youth Group.

This large and varied turnout demonstrated the strength and flourishing of interfaith in Cape Town, and the need for forums such as these.