

World Interfaith Harmony Week:

Meditative Walk and Conversation at Evera, 19th of February 2023

Trentham, Victoria, Australia

This year's walk, lunch and conversation have been organized by members of the Baha'i community of Creswick and Ballarat with one Baha'i friend coming with his wife all the way from beyond Geelong, Victoria. This year's theme was: *See your view in the mirror of the other*, inspired by a Shinto expression of the Golden Rule: "The heart of the other is a mirror, see there your own form". The idea is that listening to someone else expressing his or her view of life and the world, lived experience and lived faith may light up something in one's own world-view or religion, by contrast or by recognition.

The meeting began with lighting three tea-light candles placed in a three-sided glass candle holder, the form of a Celtic Triscul representing Wisdom – Power – Love, imagined as an ongoing flow. After which Andrew Stranieri, the convener of this year's walk, spoke a Baha'i prayer.

The Pattern of the Walk

As 'the latest chapter in the book of religions', the Baha'i faith recognizes 8 earlier stages in the revelation of God's plan and Henk Bak, the initiator of the walks showed a diagram that reflects the evolution of consciousness in the form of four triangles reflecting four consecutive 'stages' which showed themselves over the years Henk had walked the land between the 12 sites that represent the 12 main world-views, religious and spiritual cultures. It suggested itself as four 'conversations' going on:

1. Humanist – Aboriginal/Indigenous – Hindu: representing the oldest interrupted and unbroken traditions on earth;
2. Shinto – Buddhist – Dao: representing a conceptual articulation of religious/spiritual awareness, divine presence in life, natural and human;
3. Judaic – Christian – Islamic: articulation of an awareness of the one God, where God's transcendence 'overshadows' (over shines)
4. Zoroastrian – Sikh – Baha'i: from Zarathustra to Baha'ullah: Iran, ancient Persia, the articulation of an awareness of the reality of evil in the world, i.e. evil as being, power and force beyond human existence: good and evil as two primary 'principles' at the beginning of creation. Both the Sikh and the Baha'i religions have arisen out of a need to transcend the diabolical power of religious conflict, first in 15th century India and then in 19th century Iran, this time with a strong emphasis on the equality between women and men. In present day Iran both women and members of the Baha'i faith are being persecuted.

On occasion of this year's Meditative walk Henk concentrated on the first and third set of 'conversations'. He had placed the symbols of Judaism, Christianity and Islam on the table with a symbol of Humanism in the centre. The symbol for humanism, a lantern, was inspired by the Greek philosopher Diogenes, who had walked in Athens with a lantern alight in full day light. Asked 'why?' he answered: I am looking for a human being!"

World-views represented by the 10 participants were: Baha'i, Gnostic, Steiner Education/Anthroposophy, Humanist with no religious affiliation, Christian.

Before the walk:

The meeting began by all of us standing around a large table, with symbols for **Islam**, **Judaism** and **Christianity** arranged in a circle surrounding a symbol for **Humanism** at its centre. Henk explained the arrangement on the table as symbolising his intention to concentrate this walk on 'humanism' as it arose by the end of the 15th century, in Florence, Italy, by an 'Oratio on Human Dignity', 1486, published 1496, which became a 'manifesto' that initiated the 'renaissance', via a rebirth of the highlights of Greek/Hellenistic and Roman culture, into 'modernity', up to our present age. "Human dignity is inviolable". (Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948). At the end of the day I had occasion to read from spiritual teacher Shin Gwydion's public address when he launched a movement in spiritual support for human dignity with the words:

" 'Human Dignity is Inviolable',
this statement stands as a rock in history' "

Oberstdorf, Germany 4 Oct. 2009)

Human Dignity as the foundation of human rights was first formulated by a young scholar, Pico della Mirandola, a Christian scholar who was in contact with the Jewish and Islamic scholars of his time, in their languages: Latin, Greek, Syrian, Arabic. So the assumption is justified that his placing 'human dignity' reflects the conversation/correspondence of Muslims, Jews and Christians (UK chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs). Hence my suggestion for this day to concentrate on these four sites on the walk.

The walk itself:

The walk started by acknowledging and paying respect to the **Aboriginal ancestors, elders and expected new children** related to this land, Taungurung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation in this region. After this we visited the sites dedicated to **Humanism**, the site with the lantern. Then **Christianity** and **Judaism**: at the Christian site there are 7 thick flat off-cuts of massive trees, (uprooted in a recent cyclone) placed in a circle, each representing an aspect of oneself, as expressed in the words of the Gospel: "I am the Good

Shepherd – I am the Light of the World - - I am the way, the truth and the life”... At the Judaic site Henk showed and spoke a blessing in the form of the star of David,

Before visiting the site of **Islam**, we gathered around the **Baha’i** rock garden, sheltered by two umbrellas, protecting us from the midday heat. One of our Baha’i friends said another prayer to invoke God’s help for our humanity confronted by the challenges and dangers of our time. God’s plan for peace is a gradual one.

Like the Baha’i temples, this garden has a ground plan of a nine-pointed star: nine ‘doors’. The number 9 represents perfection: the last of the digits, opening out to an infinity of numbers as to a horizon.

At the site of **Islam** Henk told of his conversations with a friend, Muslim, Sufi and scholar, author of comprehensive histories of the history of Islam in Australia. As symbol for Islam I had chosen a cylindrical brass lantern with ‘perforated’ wall. From the Holy Qur’an I had chosen the text: God is light, Qur’an 24, 35-39, with its metaphor of a lantern:

The lantern in a glass,

The glass like a shimmering star,

Kindled from a blessed tree,

An Olive, neither of the East nor of the West,

Its oil almost aglow, though untouched by fire.

This image (in the translation by Tarif Khalidi, Penguin Classics) gives me an inkling in the nature of ‘one’ when Islam teaches that God is One. For me it means, that the oneness of God is ‘transparent’, ‘translucent’ and that God’s knowing, mercy and power imply the knowing, loving and realizing of Himself: transparent and infinite, The image of the lamp points to God’s oneness as an inner life, transparent to Himself and to his world-creation, and as such infinite radiance of wisdom, infinite radiance of mercy, infinite radiance of generative power: One God, radiant (or ‘per-sonant’?) through three aspects of His Being.

After a generous and convivial lunch: the conversation.

Human Dignity at the centre of the walk became also the centre of the conversation, especially as an issue of self-responsibility: *“as soon self-responsible people meet, they become and speak as ‘we’ and decide as we. After which they leave and nothing happens!”* With this observation one of the participants started the conversation.

This became a very lively discussion, which I failed to record in detail. In short it became a question of degrees or stages of becoming self-responsible. Here the Gnostic participants in the conversation offered some guidance by referring to a gnostic, i.e. age-old pre-

materialistic anthropology, according to which there are stages in the evolution of consciousness, collective as well as individual.

1. The message at the entrance of the Oracle of Delphi: **“human being know yourself!”**;
2. The symbol of the **aesculap, the mercury staff with the two serpents winding around it**: now still a symbol for medical staff or medical equipment: originally a symbol for the rising and descending streams of energy at the back of the human spine, In Sanskrit: Kundalini; (and the gradual rise of this energy through centres of perception and capacities, known as ‘chakras’ or ‘lotus flowers in the East and as ‘roses’ in the West.
3. an attempt to identify those stages of consciousness in gnostic terms, implying that at lower stages people are rather still ‘asleep’ and not ready to take on ‘self-responsibility’. One participant objected to this suggestion: from his experience and understanding, there are more people ‘awake’ and capable of acting on group decisions than the gnostic/anthropological interpretation suggests.

This part of the discussion became inconclusive as another participant in the conversation raised the notion of **‘reincarnation’** in relation to **‘self- responsibility’**: his concern being, that for those to whom ‘repeated lives’ is a reality, responsibility might be attributed to a past life and therewith perhaps an excuse for not be self-responsible in this life. Another participant wondered whether his tendency to start projects that end up failing may have something to do with an earlier life... Henk quoted Valentin Tomberg, an authority on ‘hermetic’ or ‘gnostic’ traditions in the West, the Middle East and the East, who suggested that ‘reincarnation’ is not a ‘doctrine’ that can be taught or denied, just as one cannot teach that “the person that wakes up in the morning is the same as the one who went to sleep the night before”. People have past-life experiences or they don’t. There are sufficient - documented - instances where ‘past life experiences’ have been independently verified by contemporary witness or by historical documents.

At this point it was time to close the meeting with great thanks to the organizers and all participants and wishes for a good journey home.

Notes:

1. Through a number of computer mishaps, this report has been completed much later than intended. I used my name in the “third person” mode and refrained from using other participants’ names, because there has still been no occasion to verify and ask permission. Two of the participants on a visit from New South Wales had only learnt of this project on the Farmers Market in town the day before and came to participate and greatly contribute to the day!

2. This project has grown out of my experience, participating in a 'Earth Celebration' under the motto: 'Many Rivers – One Ocean', Switzerland 1999. An interfaith project initiated by Spiritual Teacher Gwydion Fontalba (1948-2022). Pattern and content of that 10 day conference and festival became the inspiration for the meditative walks project. A book 'World-views in Dialogue', has been based on the meditations and studies of this project since 2007. See my website: henkbak.com

3. There were two Baha'i publications on the table during and after the Walk and Conversation: One by Miguel Gil: ***The Concept of Peace in the Baha'i Faith*** George Ronald Baha'i Studies Series Oxford 2022. The second book Roderic Maude and Derwent Maude ***The Servant The General & Armageddon*** The story how General Edmund Allenby and Abdu'l Bahá a head of the Baha'i faith brought the war in Palestine in 1918 to a peaceful end. George Ronald, Publisher 1998
Miguel Gil had sent his apologies and I thought it appropriate to have present through his book, which articulates effectively and thoughtfully the spiritual and the practical contribution the Baha'i Faith, its leaders and members have made and are making to Peace.

Henk Bak

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