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'One problem is the feeling in some adherents that they hold a monopoly on truth'

Georgette Bennett
president, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, and founder of Multi-faith Alliance for Syrian Refugees

The single greatest threat to world peace is the misuse and abuse of religion. The reality of that threat is all over the headlines.

As a sociologist, I was taught that religion is the largest component of culture — one can't be culturally literate without taking religion into account. One certainly sees this played out in the US.

I started my career as an academic sociologist teaching in universities, but I always felt a great need to get behind the headlines and be where the action is. My work in inter-religious relations is entirely consistent with that.

I founded the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in 1992. It's become the go-to organisation for programmes that combat religion-based hatred and misunderstanding in schools, healthcare, workplaces, and areas of armed conflict. We wrote the medical manual on religio-cultural competency, which has been distributed to more than 100,000 healthcare providers and is also available online. Our Peacemakers in Action network operates in 20 conflict zones around the world.

In 2013, I felt compelled to respond to the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. I founded the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees, mobilising the moral authority of religious leaders to alleviate the suffering of Syria's war victims.

It's extraordinarily difficult to raise money for Syrian war victims. Relative to other crises, this one's evoking the least interest. Today, there are more than 40 member organisations in the Alliance.

Among those responding to the Syrian crisis are Israeli NGOs and the Israeli government. Out of this have emerged partnerships between Syrians and Israelis delivering humanitarian assistance. This, in turn, has led to the development of a new channel for people-to-people diplomacy, preparing for a time in which Syria and Israel can be partners instead of enemies. I'm very proud of being part of this effort.

I'm also in an international group of interfaith leaders who are advancing the Global Covenant of Religions, under the patronage of King Abdullah II of Jordan and Prince Ghazi. With important

leadership from Professor David Ford and the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, the Global Covenant is focused on delegitimising the use of religion as a justification for violence.

I've been a broadcast journalist, banker, marketing consultant, and author, among other things.

I had a long career as a criminologist, and have always been interested in the link between religion and violence, between verbal and physical violence, and the dangers of apocalyptic thinking — in which the world divides into "children of light" and "children of darkness". Such thinking can only lead to dehumanising of "the other", and dehumanising ultimately leads to violence.

One of the problematic aspects of religious belief, in some adherents, is the feeling that they hold a monopoly on truth. This form of group narcissism and its dangers is clearly manifest in the behaviour of groups like ISIS, who have become a scourge on the world.

There are social-science data that correlate religious certitude with authoritarian traits, such as intolerance, ethnocentrism, and prejudice. Spiritual questing, in contrast to certitude, tends to be negatively correlated with these traits.

There are contradictory texts in all the great religions that promote acceptance and respect as well as intolerance. For example, one of the most beautiful statements about pluralism is found in the Qur'an. I'll paraphrase it: "If God had intended for all of us to be the same, he would have created us that way. Instead, he made us different so that there would be many paths to God." It's quite a contrast to the ideology espoused by ISIS, isn't it?

Being the child of Holocaust survivors is the wellspring of my motivation. Having experienced the ravages of religion-based hatred through my family, I'm deeply sensitised to the appropriation of religion for evil ends.

Also, as a young child, I had a diverse upbringing. I attended a Christian Science Sunday school, long before I attended Hebrew School. I went to a summer camp in which I sang in a touring church choir. I even went through an Evangelical phase in which I kept spouting off about God, in my very juvenile way.

The US is a miraculous country, in that it has absorbed wave after wave of immigrants and given them access to the "American Dream". So many minorities started out on the receiving end of contempt and discrimination, but by most measures, they've been able to rise above those beginnings to be fully integrated into American society. According to a survey by the Tanenbaum Center, even in the face of Islamophobia, American Muslims rank above average in education and affluence.

This doesn't mean the US is the perfect society. It has deep flaws that get ameliorated or exacerbated by the politics of the moment. Racism, although much improved, is still deeply entrenched, and income inequality has grown. But part of America's greatness is its aspirational nature: it aspires to equal opportunity, to racial harmony, to be a meritocracy.

The main source of religious diversity in the UK is immigration. We're witnessing two simultaneous



and contradictory trends — growing secularisation and growing religiosity. The multicultural experiment seems not to have succeeded in integrating immigrant populations in the UK; so there's a great deal of disaffection among immigrants. At the same time, we're seeing the rise of anti-immigration parties in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. It's no coincidence that these parties promote anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attitudes.

I often hear people ask: "Where are the moderate Muslim voices? Why

don't they speak up in the face of terrorism?" To this I respond, "They are!" I've read and heard a great deal of opposition to Islamic extremism from Muslims.

I was born in Budapest immediately after the Second World War. Much of my family was murdered in the Holocaust, but my parents survived prison, concentration camp, and forced labour. We escaped from Hungary to France in 1948, right after the Iron Curtain came down in Eastern Europe. I spent my early childhood in France, where we lived

until we received visas to emigrate to the US. My father died a year after we arrived, and I was raised by my mother alone in New York City, where I still live.

I work all the time. My work is intense, pressured, exciting, demanding, and ever-present. Travel is a part of my work life. If I ever have time off, all I want to do is stay put and give my brain a rest. I work out every day, so my brain is much more tired than my body. Just give me a good book and an engaging TV show, and I'm content.

My late husband, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, inspired me most. He was a pioneer in interreligious reconciliation, and a world-renowned human-rights activist. But my present husband, Leonard [Polonsky], has made it possible for me to act on that inspiration. Leonard is British, and we have a home in London.

Fun? What's that? Seriously, I work with some of the most interesting people in the world on some of the most interesting issues in the world. What could be more fun than that?

If I wanted to be true to the image that people have of me, I'd say my favourite sound is something classical, like Rachmaninov. But the truth is that I'm more moved by Motown. Motown energises, elates, and frees me.

I pray for an end to the ignorance and irrationality that drives so much religious hatred in the world.

Given that I'm Jewish, I'd be unlikely to find myself locked in a church; but if I were, I'd enjoy being trapped with Trevor Nunn and Simon Schama.

Dr Georgette Bennett was talking to Terence Handley MacMath. tanenbaum.org

HOT April days; the birds building, the skies high and still. On Sunday, I dressed for a procession, only to find children tying trinkets on an Easter tree. It was Sunday school with ceremony. But lunch was spring lamb and sherry.

Bad news from good friends: their days here are limited. I do not write back immediately, but ponder it in my heart. It was news that had to come, by the sound of things. They spoke philosophically about their faith, and how good the children were. The end of life these days is more medical than spiritual, I imagine.

Meanwhile, it is perfect spring-time, in early bud, and the horses are eating their heads off in the meadow opposite and plunging them into glittering water tanks.

And so we come to that favourite of mine, St Mark the Evangelist, whose symbol is a winged lion, and whose capital is Venice; a glorious person. The young man who ran away naked when Christ was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the priests grabbed his garments. It was he and his cousin Barnabas who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, although they turned back at Pergamon, a lovely city, which would become one of the greatest art centres of the ancient world.

Young people continue to travel haphazardly to destinations that promise spiritual goals. We, who lost our spiritual innocence long ago, worry about passports and suchlike impediments. St Paul turned on those who criticised him for gallivanting about when, to their minds, he should have been developing the little Christian settlements that he had established in Asia and Europe. He told his



word from Wormingford

Ronald Blythe envies the gallivanting St Mark

critics in no uncertain manner what he had gone through. All the horrors of travel in those days. Had he not had the privilege of Roman citizenship, he, a Jew, would not still be alive to tell the tale.

I see him and his young disciples stepping out along the endless Roman roads, many of them bedecked with crucifixions, at the entrance to towns such as Colchester, a few miles from Wormingford.

Two Middle European brothers who are my neighbours are taking a look at the water supply. Botten-goms Farm, like a number of Stour Valley houses, is not on the mains. So we check the springs that fill the tanks and, eventually, the taps. The water is exquisitely pure and cold as

it runs from my ditch to the River Stour, never halting, never fast or slow. Always on its way. But now and then its twin tanks — one brick, one metal — have to be pumped spotless. So this is what is going on at this minute.

For many years, I did it myself, scantily clad like St Mark, and trusting that a churchwarden would not arrive, as happened to the artist John Nash, who lived here before me. But there comes a moment in life when one hands such pleasures on to others — these youthful neighbours.

A different cloud of unknowing darkens their day: they have lost their cat. His portrait appears in the parish magazine. I feel for them, as my white cat follows in our watery steps. Cats often turn up after months, but sometimes they do not. Life for cat and man is perilous and uncertain.

What has appeared in its usual spot is my *Fritillaria* or snake's head lily, named after the dice box that every Roman soldier carried with him, and that they shook to see who should get Christ's seamless robe at Calvary.

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