

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

An Act of Reciprocal Hospitality

Friday 25th March, 15:00pm

**Discussion with Canon Dr Charlotte Bannister-Parker & Rabbi Dr Frank Dabba Smith
(Co-chair of the International Advisory Committee for Eco-Peace Middle East)**

Charlotte

I was very blessed to live in Nepal, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan during my twenties. I also conducted my master's thesis on ecology, women beekeeping in the Himalayas. Under those circumstances I had encounters of being welcomed into people's communities and homes. Many who had very little, experiencing poor housing and marginal subsistence living. I shared was exposed to their way of life and religious traditions and a welcoming which was overwhelming. I shall never forget one incident where a Muslim fisherman was prepared to laid down his life for my life. He showed the greatest act of generosity and bravery ever that one person could bestow on another.

During that time traveling and working in different countries and cultures I sensed our ability to be human to be together – as pre-state to our religious identity. Our Jewish/ Christian tradition talk about God knowing us and acknowledging us before we are born. (Jeremiah 1:5) We are in our collective humanity closer to each other than is often recognised. So, please turn to the person beside you and a story of an inter-faith encounter, with someone from a difference country and faith tradition, and why that has led you here today and to work in the inter-faith context. Thank you so much Vicki for playing the harp for us while we break out into our groups.

[music]

Participant contribution from Hannah Heil, South African.

So we were speaking about the experience of living life as a person with dark skin. We discussed how we've experienced being received as people who are so visibly "non-European" and the pain of that first moment of encounter when it becomes vividly clear that a snap and unfavourable conclusion was drawn and that in that very moment you have no chance, no chance to represent yourself appropriately or to correct the impressions drawn or to address whatever fears may have shown up for the person who judged unfavourably. It is very important to articulate this experience while also stating that as painful as it is to experience, there is also understanding. It is because of our separation into racial and ethnic

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categories that there is an assumption that people make that is uninformed, primarily to protect themselves. I wish there was a way we could give each other a chance. My son is mixed race, part African and part German and while he lives in Europe and it hasn't been his common experience to be 'othered' he has had experiences where it has been very painful for him when something happens in the world, an attack somewhere, and he suddenly becomes assumed to be a terrorist. In those moments he has no chance, this is a concern. I'm really looking for a way that we could heal each other and see that we are all the same, we are human regardless of appearances. I was getting a lot of messages about South African student doctors who were not allowed to leave the Ukraine and who were being sent to the end of the queues at the trains and borders with Poland. It is unfortunate that blessing that I have, this melanin richness, is such a threat to some people. I wish we would take moments like this and talk more and more to share that we were also raised with values, with love and with faith. I was taught to pray three times a day as a child and to appreciate God's place in life, I know the value of human life despite how a person looks. Having said all of that I also do have biases that I have checked; there were times where I have seen a group of men and I have crossed the road. Dark-skinned people aren't all evil and bad, that's all I wanted to say. Thank you for listening.

Charlotte

Thank you for sharing that, Hannah. It was insightful and moving. You touch on the need for us to acknowledging our cognitive biases of the 'other' that we hold in our hearts. Fear and fear of 'other'. How are we going to solve the climate crisis and heal the world unless we heal our fear?