

FRIENDSHIP ACROSS RELIGIONS

CONCEPTUAL AND PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

Introduction

We, Scholars and Religious Leaders, affiliated with the Elijah Interfaith Institution, have benefited from and have been greatly enriched by our experience of friendship with scholars and leaders of other faiths. Our experience has resulted in the “Invitation to Friendship’ declaration. We believe our experience holds the promise of personal enrichment for religious leaders of all religions and is an important key in tackling some of today’s most urgent global challenges. The present document provides a framework for better understanding key elements of the Friendship Declaration, what we mean by friendship, its different aspects, the needs it serves and how it can be practiced by religious leaders and faithful of different religions.

We live in special times. The world is becoming a smaller place. We are increasingly aware of our own interconnectedness and interdependence, as people, as species and also as religions. Such awareness is part of our spiritual growth. It also holds the key to facing many contemporary challenges. Never before has it been possible to think of religious leaders and communities coming together globally, in ways we are beginning to see and to which the “Invitation to Friendship” declaration calls. Never before has there been such recognition of the need for conversation and collaboration, and the promise of mutual inspiration, justice, joy and peace. Now is the moment for us to come together to fulfill that promise in committed friendship.

A. The Need

A. The challenges and threats that humanity faces today are in many ways unprecedented.

We are increasingly aware of how our fate - the fate of humanity, nations, and peoples of diverse faiths, as well as the fate of other forms of life and the life of the planet itself, are interrelated and interdependent. Even amidst our differences, there is a need for greater unity, solidarity, common purpose and common action if we are to survive, and even more so if we are to flourish. A world beset by fear of the other, indifference to the other, and the widespread practice of hate, division and violence is a world in which no one can flourish. Hate and division are the product of various forces and ideologies, some of which are religious. Religious teaching can play a constructive role in addressing all forms of hate and disunity.

B. Plurality of religions is a fact. We must find ways to live this plurality healthily.

We must find ways to enhance unity and understanding, to lower religiously-motivated violence, seeking to abolish it, and to bring to light the potential that all religions have to support life and the common good. We affirm our respect for the particularity of our traditions, the specific approaches and religious understanding of

each of our traditions and the needs and means of affirming our specific identities. Along with such respect, we seek to find ways to enhance unity, understanding, collaboration and common action towards the wellbeing of humanity, its common home, and its ultimate spiritual quest.

B. The Invitation

We invite religious leaders and religious communities to cultivate a practice of friendship to others, whatever be their faith, across the divides that have kept many religious communities apart for centuries.

This invitation is extended in the first place to religious leaders and teachers. These have the capacity to cultivate the deepest dimensions of friendship - spiritual friendship across religions. As individuals knowledgeable in their traditions, they are well equipped to form friendships that do not sidestep their religious identities but that integrate differences of identity and religious orientation into enriching friendships. Such friendships and the lessons they deliver can then provide a model for others in religious communities to practice friendship in ways that are appropriate to their level of knowledge and religious commitment. The invitation to friendship is also an invitation to understand each other and collaborate across divides. Religious leaders and teachers are invited to provide teachings to their religious communities, from within the particularity of their religious tradition, to support friendly behaviors and relations between religious communities. All, in religious communities and beyond them, are called to practice universal friendliness, as a means of overcoming negativity, hostility and hatred.

Friendship is an antidote to hate. There is no room for hate, under any circumstances, even where religious teaching or texts can be mustered in favor of hate or hostility to the other. Hate is destructive to both self and other. It undermines society and its wellbeing and is contrary to the higher vision of all traditions. Although justification for hate is sometimes given in the name of religion, we urge leaders and teachers to identify and cultivate the ways in which hate has been neutralized in the history of our traditions and their interpretation. This may be by recognizing the historical context in which certain statements were made, through interpretation, or by recalling the higher vision of tradition that often has the potential to neutralize teachings of hostility. All religions also contain teachings of reconciliation, forgiveness, and compassion that can support the practice of friendship and help overcome teachings that are contrary to it.

In recommending friendship we seek to open a field of relations between religions, a field whose potency and power for good we consider a much greater power than the energy field that polarizes people in the name of religion and keeps them apart from each other, in conflict and war.

C. Understanding Friendship

Friendship is a term that is characterized by great elasticity and flexibility. It addresses various situations and describes different levels of relationship. Friendship ranges from friendly relations that we share with many to specific, close and intimate friendships, where we can be vulnerable and transparent, which we share with only a few. Such friendships assume a sense of safety and security that grows out of the depth and intimacy of friendship. Such friendships enable deeper sharing, transparency and trust between friends.

Our appeal for friendship across religions recognizes different responses and means of implementation, suitable to different audiences. Our appeal is geared in the first instance to religious leaders who have the potential to model friendship across religions in the fullest way, where the religious and spiritual dimensions of friendship, practiced across religions, are a part of the friendship, and are even at its forefront. The deeper dimensions of friendship are more intentional, more focused, more intimate and ultimately more spiritual. Special spiritual friendship is more appropriate for those with deep religious commitment, and particularly for the specialist, the scholar, the leader, the person with deep roots in her tradition, who can share her knowledge and experience as part of the riches of interreligious friendship.

A broader form of friendship, that is more suited to the faithful at large may be referred to as general friendship. It cultivates the benevolence that, as an ideal, should govern all our relationships, as different expressions of a life of goodness. General friendship is a universal ideal, that should be practiced by all. The application of friendship must be contextual, as appropriate to each individual, and to his or her personal and spiritual capacity, and adapted to whether it is applied to select individuals or to broader communal or group relations.

Friendship is founded upon common purposes. Interreligious friendship, in its different forms, recognizes fundamental similarities that serve as its foundations. These similarities suggest that different religions share common purposes, despite the many differences we observe in the religions. These common purposes include the search for living in goodness and harmony, living an ethical life, and transcending ordinary life through aspiration and orientation of life toward a higher spiritual understanding of reality, or a supreme reality that lies “beyond”, called by most believers God.

The fullness of friendship, spiritual friendship, is based on the discovery of the depths of common spiritual purposes. A deeper unity is recognized, one that transcends our differences. This unity is discovered where friendship goes beyond a human or even religious relationship and is recognized as a spiritual event, involving

the Divine, or the depths of being, that is made manifest through friendship. The attitude of friendship is here recognized as open receptivity to a gift, to something that is beyond the friends' ability to produce. The depth of the heart and the fullness of love are unleashed where friendship is recognized as something more than human.

The range of friendship extends from instrumental friendship to friendship that is experienced as a goal and an ideal in itself.

We recognize in interreligious friendship more than the instrumental relationship, by means of which economic, social, political, diplomatic or other ends are achieved. Interreligious friendship is also a means of attaining and propagating the higher goods, commonly recognized by our different religions. It is thus not a luxury, but an important training ground in religious and spiritual growth. By means of the practice of friendship across religions we seek not only to create foundations for a healthier humanity but also to facilitate the cultivation among members of all religious traditions of the many virtues that lead towards the fulfillment and realization of the goals recognized by their own tradition. Friendship across religions calls us to bring to light the higher virtues of our traditions and to practice them generously. Because it challenges us in particular ways, it also provides the opportunity for growth in the cultivation of these virtues. Such virtues include humility, wisdom-seeking, self-criticism, open mindedness, moderation, faithfulness, generosity, forgiveness, compassion, and trust.

The practice of virtues through friendship leads us to consider not only how the ecology of relationships can be changed but also how broader ecological concerns can benefit from the practice of friendship. The ecological crisis threatens those towards whom we cultivate an approach of friendship. Friendship increases our sense of responsibility to the other. Mindfulness of their suffering and risks will enhance our efforts at protecting our common home. Cultivation of virtues will not only improve society but will also have beneficial consequences relating to our habits of heart and mind, including our habits of consumption, which have direct bearing on broader ecological concerns.

Friendship has been a subject for religious reflection and each of our traditions has brought to light different dimensions of friendship. These are mutually enriching. The practice of friendship across religions allows us to draw on the accumulated wisdom of the traditions, to make it available for the common good and to deepen our own understanding of the possibilities that friendship allows us to realize.

While recognizing the many benefits of friendship, we also recognize that its value is not exhausted in its practical instrumentality. It is as much an end as it a means. *Friendship is to be treasured for its own sake, and is a source of pleasure, joy, laughter, enrichment, inspiration, growth, self-understanding, trust, support, and personal flourishing. Friendship as a means and as an end come together where the depth of friendship is discovered as grounded in the ultimate Friend,*

the divine, that sustains friendship and that is encountered at its heart.

D. Friendship, Difference and Identity

Our appeal for friendship across religions seeks to infuse otherness with friendship, without erasing the differences between self and other, or between one religious community and another.

The practice of friendship should be carried out in ways that respect the identity and boundaries of different religious communities and should be adapted to specific situations and to particular relationships. The guiding principles of friendship - respect, care, understanding, sharing, receiving, mutuality, and collaboration - should be practiced across religious communities, while respecting their particular religious understanding and practice and maintaining their integrity.

It is our recognition that difference, and in particular difference in religious belief, is not a reason to avoid friendship. On the contrary, the challenge of constructing friendship across religious difference can lead to deep friendship and is the source of great mutual benefits. Interreligious friendship is not friendship that casts aside religious difference, overlooking it in the interest of perceived commonality. Rather, it is friendship that keeps us mindful of religious difference, and approaches this difference as a means of learning, growth and transformation that occur within the friendship. Thus, religious difference can be approached as a source of blessing.

Recognition of difference is an invitation to learning and understanding. Mutual learning and the quest for mutual understanding are the hallmark of interreligious friendship.

Learning in the framework of interreligious friendship has the double benefit of better understanding of the other, as well as a much deeper self-understanding. We consider interreligious friendship a primary means for deepening self-understanding of individuals and religious communities, as they seek to articulate their particular identity and vision in today's world.

Each one of us affirms deeply the Truth taught in his or her religion and approaches it as an expression of Truth. This does not, however, prevent us from cultivating friends from other traditions. The spiritual commonality we recognize between our religions is ultimately of greater significance than differences in teaching, that believers affirm as Truth. Ultimately, the Truth that our traditions teaches us concerning the higher reality transcends our understanding. We approach our friends informed by a humility that allows us to be open to their testimony to the spiritual life and to the benefits this may bring us, without compromising or minimizing the Truth we affirm in our own traditions.

Our religious traditions have long-standing concern with issues of integrity, authenticity and identity. Maintaining the identity of our religious community is a primary concern of the teachings of our religions. The practice of interreligious friendship should not be a means of weakening or diluting identity. Rather, it should be a means of strengthening and deepening it. Hence, friendship must be practiced in a form appropriate to the strength of identity and depth of knowledge of participants. The fullness of the practice is appropriate for those who have deep religious commitment to their tradition, and in particular for religious leaders, teachers and specialists. For these, the dangers to identity are almost non-existent, while the benefits of understanding, enrichment and self-transformation are enormous.

Practice of interreligious friendship requires trust. The trust is conditioned upon the degree of security that a particular community under specific circumstances feels. It is also related to the way in which members of the other religion offer and practice friendship. We consequently condemn unequivocally any attempt to practice interreligious friendship as a means of proselytizing and gaining members to one's religion from among "friends" falsely acquired.

E. Friendship in Practice - Practical Guidelines

The "Invitation to Friendship" declaration refers to the practice and study of friendship. The following practical guidelines suggest ways for the practical implementation of friendship for religious leaders, as well as for their communities:

1. ***Friends need to know each other.*** We recognize the problems caused by ignorance of one another, as well as ignorance in relation to our own religious traditions. *Wisdom is an antidote to the ignorance that breeds hate and division.* We recommend improved mutual knowledge and understanding. Such understanding must extend to the particularity of needs, practices and ways of living of members of different religions, and not be limited to the ideals or principles held in common by religions. It must give voice to members of a faith community, as they articulate their beliefs to others. We commend understanding our friends as they wish to be understood. Understanding must be based on correct information, supported by sound scholarship, in order to eradicate prejudice and ignorance. Unless these are eradicated, friendship cannot flourish.

Beyond these sound principles, relevant to all, we recommend deeper mutual engagement, suitable for the religious leader or specialist. We must make room to listen to one another, and to study each other's wisdom.

We must gain an appreciation for the other in his or her concrete reality, hearing them in their voice, context and message.

We particularly recommend the joint study of each other's Scriptures and texts as a way of gaining knowledge and appreciation of one another. We recommend such reading take place in a spirit of friendship, benevolence and generosity, seeking to appreciate the beauty and the riches of the other's Scripture, rather than finding fault in it. We should be open to the possibility of being inspired by the wisdom of the other's tradition, scriptures and experience. Open minded engagement of the other's Scripture may be as transformative as interreligious friendship itself.

2. *Friends respect the particularity, identity and boundaries of the other.* We should respect the integrity and identity of the other and we should never seek to force our views on the other or to compromise their integrity. We should avoid seeking to change the other's religious faith and commitment in ways that the other considers unwelcome.

We must learn to understand the boundaries and particularities of different religious communities, such as food habits, clothing, and customs regarding physical contact, even if they place limits on how we can practice friendship in ways we are used to. Similarly, we must respect the boundaries placed by religious communities on particular forms of love, such as marriage.

3. *Friends care for each other.* They seek each other's wellbeing and flourishing. We should actively assist the friend who is a religious other so that he or she may flourish in the particular society and context in which they are placed. *This translates to awareness of the need for the freedom of religion and its practice not only for oneself but also for the other who is a friend.*

4. *Friends pray for one another.* Even if they are unable to resolve one another's difficulties and differences, they can still pray for each other. *Let the members of all faiths pray for all, not only for their own communities.* Let us care for one another by carrying each other in our hearts and prayers. This will deepen a quality of care, compassion and friendship, lifting our friendship in the sight and presence of God, to the greatest heights we recognize.

5. *Friends practise solidarity in times of need.* Solidarity may be expressed especially, but not only, when facing catastrophe. When one community is targeted in hate, we should show solidarity in words and actions. *Speaking out for the other is an expression of friendship.*

6. Friendships can grow from common interests and in particular through common service. Service in addressing many of the shared needs of humanity is an arena for growing friendship. Friendship can then provide further motivation for common action and service.

7. Friendship can arise spontaneously through common action and common living; it can also be cultivated intentionally in the efforts of individuals and groups to reach beyond their boundaries. Such efforts can include invitations to homes and to meals, group gatherings of religious communities, friendship walks, sharing of music and cultural heritage, sharing of family and personal stories, and even the sharing of problems we face in our religious life. All forms of sharing are also means of gaining inspiration from the life and experience of the other. As appropriate, and following due preparation, visits to houses of worship and being present at the other's liturgy or rituals is also an important means of gaining deeper appreciation for the other.

8. Proper Communication is central to the practice of interreligious friendship. We recommend open and honest communication. Such communication neither avoids nor covers up topics of potential complexity, while at the same time respecting the other, and recognizing that not everything can be spoken about at any time.

Questioning is an important part of interreligious friendship and the processes of learning that are fundamental to it. Friends must be willing to question and to be questioned.

Given the trust that is the foundation of advanced interreligious friendship, friends must also be open to the possibility of hard questions, regarding their faith or the history associated with their faith tradition. Such hard questions should naturally be dealt with by those with appropriate religious competence. Hard questions are part of honest speech, but must be clearly distinguished from attack or criticism. Based on circumstances and the depth of relationships, such hard questions may be posed privately or in the setting of a public sharing.

Willingness to ask penetrating questions is tempered by charitable speech, that seeks to find the good and that searches for understanding, with a spirit of benevolence.

In interreligious friendships, the face of our friend is always before us. We learn to speak the same in the absence as in the presence of the friend, thereby ensuring genuine communication, that has integrated the lessons and the reality of friendship.