

## **Walking ways of Compassion and Transformation: a religious perspective on Inclusion and Integration**

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Inclusion and integration are powerful modern themes. Yet, from a religious perspective, neither are sufficient for true peace and harmony. Indeed, they can even be misused by secular authorities for mere toleration and order. This falls far short of the much greater religious vision and experience of shalom, enlightenment or communion. For as human beings we are called to a deeper inter-relationship. In different ways, all major religious traditions teach that human peace and harmony subsist in the ultimate source, meaning and goal of all things. Religiously speaking, inclusion and integration are therefore desirable *by-products* of something else. This ‘something else’ involves walking ways of compassion and transformation. For it is compassion and transformation, not merely inclusion and integration, which are at the heart of true peace and harmony. That is certainly true to my own spiritual journey and inter-religious engagement, as reflected in at least three key images.

The first image is that of ill-fitting shoes. For literally walking any distance in another person’s shoes can feel quite strange and uncomfortable. Yet it sure brings us close to another person. That is why many indigenous cultures have the same aphorism: don’t criticise someone, they say, until you have walked a mile in their shoes. Then you will connect and include them in your life.

Some years ago, I was working as a church rural and social responsibility officer in my native County Durham. This area is sometimes known as ‘the roof of England’, or ‘England’s Last Wilderness’. For much rises above the treeline, where only hardy sheep and grouse, and even hardier farmers, can eke out a living. One day I went to a farm near the top of the fells, accompanied by the local Methodist Minister. After a cup of tea, we donned gumboots to brave the cold, muddy terrain outside, and we made a farm tour, guided by our lively host. Afterwards we hurriedly threw off our boots and put on the shoes which were to hand. Only later that day, after we had both walked all over the village where we lived, did we realise that we were wearing each other’s shoes. Both pairs were very similar, but not quite identical. Mine were just slightly bigger. So my friend’s feet flapped around a little within them and he had to grip a little harder with his toes. This meant he slipped occasionally and his feet began to blister. In my case, the shoes I wore felt just a little bit pinched. After a while, I stumbled occasionally and my feet also began to blister. Yet for a time we had managed to walk in each other’s shoes.

Now some shoes are much more challenging than the slightly different ones of an Anglican or a Methodist. Yet we undoubtedly gain a refreshingly different perspective when we walk, at least imaginatively, in another’s shoes. We stop including one another only from our own point of view. We begin to enter into each other’s lives and feelings and learn what our great religious traditions call Compassion: which comes from the two Latin words *cum*, meaning with, and *passus*, meaning suffering or experiencing (from which we also derive the word passion). So to walk in another’s shoes is to cultivate compassion. It is to experience, to suffer, to share the passions, *with* the other, not from outside but from inside. It is more than mere inclusion therefore, but it *is* a vital *gateway* to inclusion. Significantly, this is also a message from those who are often excluded, who challenge others to go beyond mere inclusion to genuine relationship. As the Anglican Torres Strait Islander Bishop, Saibo Mabo, has said to others: we need you to learn how to feel, to hear, see, taste and smell with us, ‘to walk with us, treat us as

equals, and listen and learn from us. Our call is for you to come out and join our dance'. In like manner, a leading American campaign against gender-based violence is called "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes'. As part of this, it encourages men to walk a mile in women's high-heeled shoes, as a means of cultivating a genuinely compassionate inclusivity. Similarly, disability groups sometimes invite others to spend a day in a wheelchair or with other limitations, and anti-poverty and asylum seeker groups may invite those who more comfortable to live, for even a week, on the meagre incomes and restrictions of the poor and outcast. When not a gimmick, it can be powerful. What great examples of compassionate inclusion there can be too, when others stand alongside the often excluded: as other-than-Muslim women have done, for instance, by publicly donning headscarves (hijabs), when Islamaphobia is inflamed.

Secondly, compassionate inclusion is illustrated by pilgrimage, a spiritual tool significantly rediscovered in recent times. For pilgrimage helps to create companionship, a vital religious outcome, and means, of walking in compassion. Again, the word has Latin derivations: from that same word again *cum*, meaning 'with', and from the word *panis*, which means 'bread'. A companion therefore is someone who shares bread with another. As 'bread' in the ancient world meant, not just food, but all that we need for life, then a true companion is someone who walks with another through all that life gives and takes away. It is not surprising then that Jesus taught his followers the prayer 'give us this day our daily bread'. He was inviting all his followers to be companions, to each other and to others. And, as modelled by Jesus, it is through that kind companionship that all creation is fully included in divine compassion.

That all sounds wonderful. Yet it is also very costly. For it is very different from inclusion which is essentially toleration, or good manners. That may be sufficient to hold society together in relative outward peace and integration. It is not however the compassionate inclusion of loving companions. This requires a much greater openness to my other great watchword: transformation. At its best, integration without transformation also brings order and outward cooperation. At its worst, it can become merely assimilation, driving dynamic differences and unresolved conflicts underground. Instead, our great religious traditions call for transformation of the inner and outer worlds, of self, family, group, nation and world, as the precondition, and process, of true divinely-human integration.

No wonder pilgrimage is therefore common to so many religious traditions. It is so often true, as Augustine of Hippo once said, that it (whatever it is) is solved by walking. For pilgrimage can connect and re-connect individual psyches, group relationships and sources of difference: thereby including and integrating, healing and transforming. Somehow the dynamic of movement helps release transforming powers. On a pilgrimage we are never exactly the same people who set off together. We have learned something, often something important, about ourselves and our companions. We have been brought together by a common endeavour, bigger than our separate divisions. If we have not literally walked in each other's shoes, then we have certainly shared more deeply as we have walked in each other's footsteps. We have learned a little about what it is to see, hear, feel, taste and smell, as others do. Nor is this true just of literal, never mind traditional religious, pilgrimages. Some of my holiest pilgrim experiences have been on journeys connecting people and places which had no real connection before. This has brought down barriers and taken people out of our usual 'boxes'. Other significant moments have been on pilgrimages of the heart, or a pilgrimages of understanding: where, if we are not literally walking together, then we are moving into new spaces together and learning to be compassionate companions. More recently, I have similarly been inspired by the labyrinth as a tool for walking

with compassion and thereby finding personal transformation and integration. Likewise, treasuring our personal and shared dreams can bring integration of our divided selves.

Again, that sounds good, but it is much harder in practice. How, for example, do we learn to be compassionate companions, when the demands of others for inclusion and integration can seem to threaten to overwhelm our own identities? Several examples come to mind, not least the perceived threat to identity for so many of the world's poorest people in the face of western-based assumptions and the sheer power of global capitalism. How do we help very threatened people to move to genuine inclusion and integration in the face of sometimes huge pain and shattered lives? After all, *we* do not include everyone and everything, do we? In Australia, we no longer accept racism for instance, or gender-based violence, at least in our official, public lives. So how do we help one another to grow in valuing healthy difference, whilst rejecting abusive difference? How do we help both build the right bridges and draw appropriate limits? Take, for instance, the still potently disruptive issue of (homo)sexuality, which still causes much angst in some quarters. This is certainly a fraught issue for religious engagement with inclusion and integration. Within the worldwide Anglican Communion, for example, this is a major source of conflict, because it raises a number of core questions about identity, the acceptable ordering of society and individual lives, the means to discern truth and holiness, and the validity of secular and culturally conditioned ideas of inclusion and integration. Now, it seems to me that, in the western world, the debate is essentially over. Indeed, my North American Anglican brothers and sisters several years ago received gay and lesbian people into the highest Church offices. However, this remains a source of vulnerability and outrage to many and the path to inclusion is still strewn with thorns, particularly in some quarters where the issues have yet properly to be recognised. So we need more than legislation and affirmative action. For genuine inclusion and integration in such trying matters, we also need ways of compassionate listening and of self-transformation. Being loving companions does not mean agreeing with everything in the other, nor failing to allow some matters, for the present, to be ones on which we agree to disagree.

Which leads to a third image: that of stone walls and bridges. In 'England's Last Wilderness' these are everywhere, as vital means of marking and creating space, nurturing identity and connection. Yet to create a stone wall demands great artistry. It requires great fellow-feeling, or compassion, for the huge variety of stones which need to be brought together in one integrated whole. It requires great loving care, patience and wisdom to build a stone wall to last. It requires listening to the nature of each stone and tenderly addressing the right means for transformation. It certainly demands time and application, and the right heart. Rushed into, stones do not easily come together or integrate. They form a harmony not by force but from caring connection. When undue force is applied, they will break, shatter, or collapse one upon another. Yet with the right sensitivity, with a compassionate mind and heart, rough edges can be removed, angular surfaces blend and support one another, and the hardest stones transformed. This is much like the religious task of nurturing compassionate inclusion and transformative integration. So may we learn these skills of the master-builder, and of the artist. My favourite stone wall image is thus from a famous work by the wonderful northern nature-sculptor Andy Goldsworthy. In his creation, the stone wall forms not a barrier but a bridge, or a path. It follows the contours of the heart, taking each of the different shapes and melding their qualities together. Thereby it weaves in and out of life's obstacles and helps us negotiate, and travel onward together, through all climates of change.