

What makes a good community? And what is the contribution which faith communities make to a good community?

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In the prologue to his book, *The Different Drum*¹, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck relates a story about a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Only five monks still lived in the monastery and they were all over 70 years of age.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery stood a little hut occasionally used as a hermitage by a rabbi from a nearby town.

One day the abbot decided he should visit the rabbi and ask if he had any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. 'What can I do for you?' he asked.

The old abbot told the rabbi the story of the monastery, how great the order had been at the height of its influence, how the monastery had had many branch houses, how it had suffered as a result of anti-monastic persecution and the rise of secularism. Now, all that was left of this once great order was the decaying mother house and five elderly monks, who would soon die and leave nothing behind them except a crumbling building. Could the rabbi advise him what he should do to save the monastery?

'I know how it is,' said the rabbi. 'The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue any more.'

The old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke quietly of deep things.

The time came for the abbot to leave. The two holy men embraced. 'It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,' said the abbot, 'but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?'

'No, I am sorry,' the rabbi replied. 'I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.'

The abbot returned to the monastery and the other monks gathered around him. 'What did the rabbi say?' one of them asked.

'He couldn't help,' the abbot answered. 'We just wept and read the Torah together. But just as I was leaving he said something rather strange. He said that the Messiah is one of us. Whatever did he mean?'

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered the rabbi's cryptic words. Did he really mean that one of them was the Messiah? Who could it be? Father Abbot? He must have meant Father Abbot. Or what about Brother Thomas; he's a holy man. He definitely couldn't have meant Brother Eldred – Elred is always so crochety; but come to think about it, he's almost always right. Surely not Brother Phillip? He's so passive. Mind you, he's always there, as if by magic, when you need him. Perhaps Phillip's the Messiah. Of course, the rabbi could not possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. But supposing he did. Suppose I'm the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated the possibility that one of them was the Messiah, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect.

¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*. London: Rider & Co, 1988, pp. 13–15

The forest around the monastery was beautiful and visitors would occasionally come to the monastery to picnic on its lawn, to wander along its paths, perhaps to go into the dilapidated chapel to pray or meditate.

As they did so, they began – without really being conscious of it – to sense the aura of extraordinary respect that had begun to surround the old monks. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about the atmosphere of the place, and the visitors, hardly knowing why, would return to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to show them this special place. And the friends brought their friends.

Some of the younger men who came to visit began to talk with the old monks. One asked if he could join them. Then another – and another.

Within a few years the monastery began to thrive and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, became a vibrant centre of light and spirituality in the realm.

Of course, this is a story about a particular kind of community, perhaps not the kind of community we are talking about today. But I like the story because it says at least two very important things about community. Firstly, respect for one another is foundational to genuine community. And second, good community is very, very attractive.

'Community' is a sadly abused word today. I grind my teeth when I hear politicians and others talking glibly about 'the community', for example when they mean any group of people who happen to live in the same geographical area or who are alleged to share a set of interests or a common agenda. Even the notion of a 'faith community', much loved amongst those of us involved in inter faith dialogue and multi faith collaboration and increasingly used by government officials is pretty dubious – and is certainly questioned by some people of faith. 'Community' has become a catch-all term, evacuated of much of its meaning.

So what is a community?

Scott Peck says this of community:

If we are going to use the word meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to 'rejoice together, mourn together,' and to 'delight in each other, make others' conditions our own.'²

The Universal House of Justice, the Bahá'í community's world governing council has defined community in this way:

... it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.

You may well think that you've never encountered any community like this, but the definition certainly reflects Bahá'í experience and aspiration.

This conception is of an active community, a shared social space in which individuals, families and institutions take charge of their own lives and strive for spiritual and social progress. This is not the vacuous 'community' of phrases such as 'treatment in the community'.

² M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*. London: Rider & Co, 1988, pp. 59–60.

The Department for Communities and Local Government's website³ defines 'sustainable communities' as

... *places* where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all. [Emphasis added.]

I would question the Department's emphasis on place. I live in a *place*, but I wouldn't call that place a *community*. It lacks certain elements that would seem to be essential to the lived experience of community, especially if we countenance the definition of community offered by the Bahá'í world governing council. Place alone does not make community.

A real community must surely be founded on a network of relationships of people to each other, of people to their environment, to the place where they live or to the interests they share. It must have some order, some structure, some sense of purpose beyond merely existing. We are, after all, ineluctably social beings; we find or make meaning in large part from our networks, our social contexts, our communities. In the end, a good community must surely provoke feelings of belonging and of wanting to belong.

But that sense of belonging can be a source of trouble. We human beings are inclined to define 'us' as 'not them', to create our identities around inclusions and exclusions. We want to belong to 'us' and exclude 'them' from our social groupings. This may be a source of comedy when it applies to membership of the bowling club, but it is no laughing matter when it comes to belonging or not belonging to religious groups or organizations. Sadly, notions of exclusion can dominate religious thinking – we are the saved, you are the damned – and such thinking, when combined with a sense of one's own righteousness can lead to death and destruction.

The Bahá'í teachings specifically forbid this. Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith says, in what has become an iconic quotation from His writings:

The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.

The world governing council of the Bahá'í community has characterized the oneness of humankind as 'at once the operating principle and the ultimate goal' of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh himself

For Bahá'ís, an understanding of human oneness is necessary. But it is not sufficient. We must also have the lived experience of unity in diversity, of human solidarity, and it is this that is the very foundation of what it means to build a community. We all live on a single planet, which we are at risk of rendering uninhabitable, whether by war or by greed and over-consumption. We are all part of one single human family, whatever the colour of our skins, whatever language we speak, whatever nation we are citizens of, whatever religion we follow.

Bahá'ís quite often refer to themselves as world citizens. This sense of belonging to and having responsibility for the whole world and its biosphere is a strong one. But it does not impinge on or conflict with our smaller-scale community loyalties and identities. Nor should our community identity detract from our wider loyalty. And nothing in the Bahá'í teachings can be used to justify any form of exclusivism, whether in the form of racism or gender inequality or claims of religious exclusivity. The Bahá'í community's world governing council wrote this to Bahá'ís in Africa:

As Bahá'ís we are attached to our tribes and clans, just as we are to our families and, on a larger scale, to our nations, but we do not allow this attachment to conflict with our wider loyalty to humanity.

³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/sustainablecommunities/whatis/>

So what does this mean in practical terms?

Bahá'ís regard their communities as a 'living laboratory' in which they can translate the Bahá'í teachings and principles into constructive action. We are a learning community that strives to build unity of thought and endeavour through a cyclical discipline of study of our Sacred Texts, consultation, action and reflection. Of course, Bahá'í communities are not monastic communities, so we also have to learn how to make space and time in the hurly burly of daily living for this discipline.

A key element in the building and maintaining of communities is consultation. By consultation Bahá'ís mean the non-adversarial process by which Bahá'í communities, their elected governing councils, families, businesses, voluntary organizations, and other groups can arrive at fair decisions.

There are no formal speeches for and against the motion, no proposition and opposition. Everyone is free to speak to the matter under consultation, adding further facts and information and voicing their opinions.

Properly conducted, consultation ensures that all voices are heard. It is an egalitarian process that takes no account of differences in wealth, gender or ethnicity. Of course, some contributions will be better than others, but this will depend as much on spiritual insight as on academic, commercial or other achievement. Consultation runs counter to traditional concepts of power or influence. Its aim is to arrive at the best possible decision in the circumstances, recognizing human limitations and allowing for decisions to be revised in light of learning.

I would suggest that good community, like good consultation, depends as much on individual virtue and the respect that members of the community have for each other as it does on government definitions and procedures, such as one can see on the DCLG website – as worthy as these definitions and procedures may be.

It is my belief that the most powerful contribution that faith communities can make to good community is the living, learning, example, inspired by their principles and beliefs, that they can, at their best, offer to the wider world. In this, as in so many other things, love does more than any amount of preaching. Love is not merely a praiseworthy emotion or an ephemeral inclination of the human heart, but a force of attraction, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Head of the Bahá'í community from 1892 to 1921, urges:

Strive to increase the love-power of reality, to make your hearts greater centres of attraction and to create new ideas and relationships. Create relationships that nothing can shake; form an assembly that nothing can break up; have a mind that never ceases acquiring riches that nothing can destroy. If love did not exist, what of reality would remain?⁴

And why is this important? So that every human being can flourish, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

... [in] harmony and fellowship, and love and solidarity; indeed it is compassion and unity, and the end of foreignness; it is the being at one, in complete dignity and freedom, with all on earth.⁵

A pipe dream? No, not if we want what the old monks in the monastery achieved by learning to respect each other, that indefinable quality of attraction that radiates from genuine community. Not if we want what the DCLG's *terminus ad quem*, namely:

... thriving, vibrant, sustainable communities which will improve everyone's quality of life.⁶

⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*. Boston: Tudor Press, 1918, p. 255.

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*.

⁶ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/sustainablecommunities/whatis/>