

Talking and Listening, Explaining and Understanding

Thought for the Day

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As yet another atrocity unfolded in France, with the horrific murder of Father Jacques Hamel while conducting Mass in his own church, it was difficult not to think about the role of religion in defining both the victims and the perpetrators of such abominations, and to ponder whether there is any way to avoid a growing chasm filled with fear and hatred.

I found myself challenging my own pessimism last week when I saw a headline that initially filled me with foreboding: a woman on a flight from Glasgow is so alarmed when she sees her neighbour using the word “Allah” in a text that she rushes from her seat and alerts the cabin staff. Fortunately, there was a happy ending – the other woman explained that “Allah” is just the Arabic for “God”, and that she was sending good wishes to friends – and she and her new Christian friend spent the rest of the flight discussing their shared faith.

I find that heart-warming, and I realise my fear about how the story might have ended was conditioned by recent reports of people being escorted off their flights because some other passenger took fright at their language or their actions or their dress. Which kind of world would we prefer to live in? We know we’re all different, so aren’t we all better off in a world where we understand and respect one another’s differences?

Suspicion of “the other” is what often leads to hatred and xenophobia, and as we’ve all too often seen, even to murder. But we can all help by doing what those women on that flight from Glasgow did – talking and listening, explaining and understanding. That’s why we at the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities are sending materials to schools to help pupils understand who Jews are, and just this week we are announcing a new initiative with the Church of Scotland to explore and explain our theological agreements and differences. Surely one thing we can all agree on is that mutual understanding is better than perpetual mistrust.

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