This morning I will speak about interfaith dialogue from my perspective as an orthodox Jew, from the Hasidic tradition. Key themes for me are fear, separateness and peace. I will not include all perspectives such as that of Progressive Judaism. I think what is relevant for teachers of Studies of Religion is not a complete objective knowledge of the various positions of any faith, but a glimpse and provisional knowledge of the subjective workings of faith within the life of one of its adherents.

I say provisional and incomplete knowledge because if I was giving this talk in a synagogue I would organise it along my own terms of reference of Jewish Law and stories. But I am here at this conference and I speak to you in your language and according to your organising schema and requirements, so I will begin with the theme of beliefs.

Interfaith and Principal Beliefs

Seeking peace outside one’s own faith community can be said to flow from the 1st, the 8th, and the 12th of the 13 principles of faith articulated by Maimonides. The first is the belief in the existence of the Creator as the Primary Cause of all that exists. The 8th of the 13 principles is the belief in the divine origin of the Torah. The 12th is the belief in the arrival of the Messiah and the messianic era.

It is the belief in the truth of the Torah and its creation story that affirms that all humans were created by the one God in his own image. It is a belief that rather than humans randomly appearing as a consequence of evolution, we were created intentionally as a species that all descend from the one common ancestor, as the Talmud puts it so that ‘the families of the earth should not provoke one another saying my ancestor is greater than yours’.

The belief in the truth of the Torah calls me to remember how God himself changes the truth for the sake of peace. When God tells Abraham about his wife’s questioning the angels promise that she would bear a child because she and her husband were old. In G-d’s retelling he misquotes Sarah, only mentioning that Sarah herself was old. That is how important peace is in the Torah.

The 12th principle, the belief in the Messiah is also highly relevant, at least from my perspective as a Jew from the Chabad Hasidic tradition. For the Jew, the world is unfinished. The Talmud teaches that God made three walls of the world and left the fourth unfinished so that we can be partners in creation. There is a sense of discomfort with our world as it is, a sense that it needs correction. For many modern Jews there is a focus on Tikkun Olam, which is Hebrew for fixing the world. This, arguably, stems from a sense that a world in which there is war, crime, greed and poverty is a temporary aberration before the world reaches its true state which is realised with the coming of the Messiah. While Jews might disagree about the nature of the Messianic era, I think the Messianic bug has bitten a great many Jews who like people of many other faiths and none agitate for a more just world.
Interfaith in Jewish Law

Our belief in the divine origin of the Torah is also applied to the validity of human interpretations of the Torah, and the body of law called Halacha, which means the going, based on the teachings in the Talmud, which we see as an extension of the Torah itself.

In Halacha, Jewish religious law, there are various practices that are mandated because of the ways of peace, such as providing for the poor of the idol worshippers along with the poor of Israel. However, for centuries Jewish law was concerned with peace between people as individuals rather than seeking peace between faiths. It is useful to consider that while the core texts of Christianity and Islam are presented, other monotheistic faiths already exists, when the Torah was given the only other systems of worship at that time were diametrically opposed to Judaism, and Judaism saw these forms of worship as simple evil. The Torah, in fact calls on the Jews to destroy the idols, rather than tolerate them.

The Jews and Judaism went into exile around the time that Christianity was founded. For much of the past two thousand years in Christian Europe the question of interfaith relations from a Jewish perspective was about survival of the powerless in the face of persecution by the powerful. The treatment of Jews by Muslim led Governments was usually better. Yet even there while, there were, no doubt informal friendly learned interfaith discussions between Jewish and Muslim individuals, no guidance emerged from this informal practice that influenced formal traditions or texts that have much relevance to what we are doing right here today. This question only arose in the 20th century with very little precedent law to consider.

On 28 October 1965 the Pope set a new positive direction in his Declaration on the relations of the church to non-Christian religions known as Nostra Aetate (in our time). The progressive or reform Jewish response was enthusiastic, yet I need to speak from the orthodox tradition that I am familiar with. Two Halachic responses were put forward at that time by senior Rabbis Moshe Feinstien and JB Soloveitchic respectively.

R. Moshe Feinstein’s approach was reactive and very conservative. He offers his guidance approximately one week prior to an interfaith event that was scheduled to be held in New York on the 5th of March 1967 at which a young Rabbi Lander was committed to attend. In a ruling addressed to Lander, dated a mere four days prior to the event, Rabbi Feinstein expressed his vehement opposition to any form of participation in interfaith dialogue.

“It is clear and simple that such participation constitutes a grave violation of the prohibition against appurtenances to idolatry. For a plague has now broken out in many locales on account of the initiative of the new pope, whose only intent is to cause all the Jews to abandon their pure and holy faith so that they will accept Christianity. Indeed, it is much more convenient to convert them in this manner than to employ the methods of hatred and murder that popes prior to him utilized. Consequently, all contact and discussion with them, even on worldly matters, is forbidden, for the act of “drawing near” is in and of itself forbidden, as it falls under the category of the grave prohibition against “closeness with idolatry”—hitkarvut ‘im ‘avodah zarah.

And one should also consider this [drawing near] as falling under the category of prohibition against the “the one who entices and the one who leads (others) astray (to idol-
worship, נַעֲשַׁנִּים וּמְדיח (Meisis Umediach)... You should pay no attention to the fact that you will not have fulfilled your promise to go there and speak. On the contrary, perhaps through your decision not to attend on account of the prohibition, others too will not go. In this way, you will be among those who gain merit for the public.

40 years have passed to gather evidence to either confirm or dispel the fears Rabbi Feinstein raised. A veteran of the field of interfaith offers the following testimony: "I have been a participant in interfaith dialogue at the very highest levels, primarily with the Catholic Church and the Vatican.... In all my years and experiences with Jewish-Christian religious dialogue, I have never encountered any Christian official making even an implicit attempt to convert me to his faith!" My own experience over the last thirteen years on the ground with representatives of various churches was the same. There was always a focus on understanding each other and respect. I never was subjected to attempts to convert me to Christianity.

In contrast to Rabbi Feinstein, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s approach is one of qualified engagement. He states: "In the areas of universal concern, we welcome an exchange of ideas and impressions. Communication among the various communities will greatly contribute towards mutual understanding and will enhance and deepen our knowledge of those universal aspects of man which are relevant to all of us.

In the area of faith, religious law, doctrine, and ritual, Jews have throughout the ages been a community guided exclusively by distinctive concerns, ideals, and commitments. Our love of and dedication to God are personal and bespeak an intimate relationship which must not be debated with others whose relationship to God has been moulded by different historical events and in different terms. Discussion will in no way enhance or hallow these emotions.

We are, therefore, opposed to any public debate, dialogue or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of our faith vis à vis "similar" aspects of another faith community.

We believe in and are committed to our Maker in a specific manner and we will not question, defend, offer apologies, analyze or rationalize our faith in dialogues centred about these "private" topics which express our personal relationship to the God of Israel... There cannot be mutual understanding concerning these topics, for Jew and Christian will employ different categories and move within incommensurate frames of reference and evaluation".

While Soloveitchik was not afraid of a plot to convert Jews, he was afraid that in the dialogue, some of the unique approach of Judaism would be lost. He was concerned that in seeking a common language where none exists, the minority faith would mould itself to fit the frame work of the majority faith.

In a sense, I have done exactly that in my talk today. I began with linking my approach to “principle beliefs” because this was the frame chosen by the organisers of today’s panel based on the Syllabus. I suspect, and forgive me if I am mistaken, but it seems to be a particular Christian approach. Beliefs are assumed to be the key driver. Yet Judaism is driven by stories and commandments as much as principal beliefs. Yet to make myself understood,
I have in a sense needed to put my round square peg in the round hole - to the extent that I could do so without being intellectually dishonest or misleading you.

On balance, I am ok with this because this enables us to have a person to person conversation and is helpful for your students to be prepared for our diverse world. Maimonides states in relation to God, but this can be extended to the mystery of the inner life of people: “the ultimate knowledge is (to know that) we will not know”. We are generating subjective provisional knowledge rather than a collection of facts. Two resources that can extend what we are doing today is www.togetherforhumanity.org.au which can organise an interfaith panel like the one we have today to come to visit your school. Our organisation has also created a website www.differencedifferently.edu.au which has a diversity Q&A section that allows students to virtually ask people from a diverse range of beliefs a selection of questions about their beliefs and practice.

One common thread I notice between the positions of both Rabbis is the presence of fear. For me as a Jew, fear was celebrated. One of the highest forms of praise I heard when I was growing up in a very orthodox community in the US is that this person is a Yarei Shamayim: one who fears heaven. The little hat I wear on my head is called Kippa by many Jews but not in the community where I was growing up. We called in a Yarmulkeh, which is corrupted version of the words Yareh M’Kah, fears God. The word used to describe the most rigorous and perhaps rigidly orthodox Jews is Haredi, the ones who tremble. While in the west we frown at fear, in traditional Judaism fear was seen as a key motivator for ethical behaviour and proper worship.

Fortunately, Soloveitchik is less fearful than his trembling Haredi counterpart. Within the limits he had set he charts a way forward for interfaith interaction. Soloveitchik states that: When, however, we move from the private world of faith to the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors, communication among the various faith communities is desirable and even essential. We are ready to enter into dialogue on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, Man’s Moral Values, The Threat of Secularism, Technology and Human Values, Civil Rights, etc., which revolve about religious spiritual aspects of our civilization.

Discussion within these areas will, of course, be within the framework of our religious outlooks and terminology. Jewish rabbis and Christian clergymen cannot discuss socio-cultural and moral problems as sociologists, historians or cultural ethicists in agnostic or secularist categories. As men of God, our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and terminology bear the imprint of a religious world outlook. We define ideas in religious categories and we express our feelings in a peculiar language which quite often is incomprehensible to the secularist.

In discussions we apply the religious yardstick and the religious idiom. We evaluate man as the bearer of God’s Likeness. We define morality as an act of Imitatio Dei, etc. In a word, even our dialogue at a socio-humanitarian level must inevitably be grounded in universal religious categories and values. However, these categories and values, even though religious in nature and biblical in origin, represent the universal and public-not the individual and private-in religion.
To repeat, we are ready to discuss universal religious problems. We will resist any attempt to debate our private individual commitment.

In practice this has meant that when I sought permission to work on an interfaith basis we called the work “Goodness and Kindness”. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief Rabbi of the UK called his book on interfaith relations, “the home we build together”.

As Soloveitchik himself acknowledged the border between the practical and theological is porous. What are we doing here today? Are we addressing the practical need for an educated society that understand each other and gets along or a high level theological discussion? Surely it is a bit of both. I raised this question in a conversation with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks at his home in London one night. I had come on one of those red double decker buses and to fit the stereotype it was raining. Rabbi Sacks, do you think Rabbi Soloveitchik has been superseded by the reality of interfaith interaction 50 years on. Rabbi Sacks smiled slightly and said, “we apply ‘Soloveitchik’ broadly”.

Moving from principal beliefs to my own language, that of stories, I will add one more point about how I do interfaith. Lot, the nephew of Abraham, was a resident of the defeated city state of Sodom. He is taken captive in war along with the rest of the Sodomites.

Abraham goes into battle to save him and Sodom. After Abraham emerges victorious, God tells him “do not fear Abraham, your reward is very great”vi. There is an obvious question here. What was Abraham afraid of? One explanation is that he had expected that when he saved the people of Sodom they would change their ways and become more like him. They did not and he was disappointed, perhaps it was wrong to save these sinners if they would not change. God tells Abraham not to be afraid. ‘This is not your problem. You did the right thing’. Some people go into inter-faith work very much like Abraham did to his battle, expecting the “other” to change. It rarely happens. If it happens at all, it does when you least expect it. This story and its interpretation inspires me to prioritize sincerity in interfaith.

Chosen people
In the spirt of sincerity it is time I level with you about this word “goyim”. Do Jews believe that we should be a part of the family of nations or apart, that is separate from them and many of you here today? Apart or a part, this is the question!

If ever there was a word without a fixed meaning it is the word, “Goy”. In Hebrew the word means ‘nation’, but in Yiddish it generally has more negative connotations. In the Torah it sates: “You shall not follow the practices of the nation (goy) that I am sending away from before you, for they committed all these [sins], and I was disgusted with them….I am the Lord your God, Who has separated you from the nations. And you shall separate between clean animals and unclean ones … that I have separated for you to render unclean. And you shall be holy to Me for I, the Lord, am holy, and I have separated you from the peoples, to be Mine”. That is a lot of separation.

Traditional commentary develops this theme. “At the time that you are separate from the nations you are mine, and if not then you belong to Nebuchadnezzar the wicked and his friends”. There is a conflation of the choice not to eat the meat of a pig out of respect for God with the “separation from them”, which must also be done for the sake of God’s name.
As always there is another way to read the text. One of the great traditional translator/commentators adds three words at the end of the phrase, from the peoples... לַמָּהֵי פלחין קָדָם - So that you should be worshipping me vii. “And you shall be holy to Me, for I, the Lord, am holy, and I have separated you from the people so that you should be worshipping me viii.” I think this way of reading it supports an approach that combines togetherness with separation. We can be separate in worship and together in practical and social matters, as Sacks defines it broadly.

I will end with Soloveitchik: “We have always considered ourselves an inseparable part of humanity” and willing to participate in discussions with people of others faiths, as people of faith in dialogue about social issues. One of the great social issues of our time is peace and dignity for all, what studies of religion teachers do every day and we are doing here is a critical part of implementing the divine design of the creation of human, with only one common ancestor.

---

i Talmud, Sanhedrin
ii 18 Adar 1, 5727 corresponding to the 1st of March 1967
v Soloveitchik, J.B., Rabbi, addendum to his essay, Confrontation 1964
vi Genesis 15:1
vii Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel
viii Leviticus 20: 26