

## Josh Cass



Josh Cass is the Development and Fundraising Manager at the Three Faiths Forum (3FF) and one of the founders of FRIA, the Forum for Religion and International Affairs, a collaborative training experience that equips professionals working in international affairs with approaches for effective engagement with religion, faith and belief. He was formerly the Director of Fodip, the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine, a specialist NGO focused on enabling conversations across lines of difference on the on-going Israeli-Palestinian situation. He is an experienced facilitator and has worked for a range of peace building and interfaith organisations, including the Encompass Trust and St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. He holds an MA in International Studies and Diplomacy from SOAS, University of London, and is an alumnus of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Fellowship programme.

### Remarks by **Josh Cass**

Thank you.... Sue Breeze, Baroness Anelay team at the FCO....

With your permission I would like to begin with an aside; 3FF, the Three Faiths Forum, the organisation for which I work, was co-founded by Sir Sigmund Sternberg who died on Tuesday evening. To those that knew him, Sir Sigmund, Sigi, was I think it is fair to say, the closest thing that we had to a celebrity in the interfaith world, certainly in the UK. Amongst the many pictures that we have in our office of Sigi, is one taken here in the FCO. It shows an irrepressible Sigi, he must have been nearly 90 when the picture was taken, alongside David Milliband at the unveiling of a plaque dedicated to the memory of those British diplomats who helped Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution. Sigi said:

“The brave British diplomats, known and unknown, who displayed their concern for the suffering of Jews and other victims of Nazism, are properly entitled to the recognition and appreciation which we accord them with the unveiling of this plaque at the heart of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It will forever be a reminder of the fact that, even in the most terrible of circumstances, individuals of good conscience can make a contribution to the safeguarding of humanity.”

As a backdrop to this conference it is a fitting reminder that diplomats and civil servants can take some pride in the fact that there is a tradition of striving to protect freedom of religion and belief and that this “orphaned right” can and must have a place in the contemporary human rights agenda.

I listened with interest to yesterday's discussions, and a recurrent theme both from the various panels and the floor, was a concern (or perception) that at best interfaith activities are an elitist pursuit and at worst irrelevant because they have seemingly little practical application in the real world – wherever that might be. I might add as someone who has worked on these issues for a number of years that those critiques are neither new, nor wholly unfair. Indeed, one could add further critiques to that list; for instance, that interfaith done badly can reinforce the problems that it is trying to solve – to what extent do those engaged in so called interfaith activities have an active stake in the problem or issue that is being addressed and might their inclusion risk ossifying the situation further?

As a practitioner, I find these analyses troubling, however, in spite of that analysis, the organisation that I work for, and others like ours, have never had our methods and approaches held in higher demand. One doesn't book out the Locarno suite, invite hundreds of the best thinkers on these questions from around the world (and your humble speaker), take several days out of ministers schedules unless it is thought that there is something which is both useful and relevant to the times in which we live.

So for colleagues working in government or other international organisations, how might you work to ensure that the projects that you initiate are both relevant and effective? As someone who has worked on projects and programmes which sit in the space known as “interfaith” the following are some reflections from the field. It is neither an exhaustive list nor a universally held set of truths, but they have helped to shape the work that I, and colleagues, have helped to deliver.

For the purposes of this talk I will limit myself to three points:

The question of context

The framing of content

And finally, the challenge of action

The question of context

At its heart interfaith is about dialogue. It is a cliché to say it, but to be in dialogue is an active process and requires all parties involved to engage in active and deeply attentive listening. However, from my experience that listening needs to begin way before the interfaith activity itself is initiated. It begins with an understanding of the context in which one is working – by listening deeply to the parties involved, to the environment in which they live and the wider context in which the problem or issue is rooted, one becomes attune to the needs of those involved and also opportunities which might exist within the context in which one is working.

Practically speaking, what does this mean?

It means that one must be prepared to emulate best practice regardless of where it originates – 3FF is small UK-based charity, each year we work with nearly 15,000 people on projects which build trust and overcome difference, until very recently our remit was solely within the UK, increasingly though we are being asked to work in partnership with organisations around the world because funders and other stakeholders recognise the impact of our models. If you had said to us five years ago that we would be working in the geographies in which we now work we would have been deeply surprised.

It means being prepared to leverage the expertise and networks that already exist – partnerships are fundamental to the success of effective interfaith work; our success over twenty years is borne from our ability to reassure partners that we are an honest broker of interfaith dialogue coming at the problem with neither a political nor religious agenda. It might also mean looking beyond the usual suspects when it comes to interfaith – who actually has a stake in this issue? How can they be brought into the conversation?

And it means working in a spirit of mutual respect – perhaps the most crucial point of all, interfaith work rests on that spirit of mutual respect, collaboration and trust by all parties in the process.

None of these things are impossible to achieve but they do require an attentiveness and an ability and willingness to be patient and to listen.

The framing of content

Somewhere along the line the idea emerged that interfaith was simply an extension of Contact Theory – the idea that if I regularly meet and engage with someone different to me that I will inevitably hold more positive views about them and they of me. And while it is true that the majority of interfaith takes place at this level, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that, there is a common misconception that interfaith cannot go further than that. As someone who has regularly facilitated action-oriented dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims on the on-going Israeli-Palestinian situation, I can assure you that that is not the case, that it is indeed a misconception.

The question then becomes, how do you get to a point where you can have those more challenging conversations?

On this, I would offer a few observations; firstly, a plea for professionalism. These are difficult processes and difficult issues, interfaith practitioners have built up expertise in engaging on these questions and have methods which are effective at enabling challenging conversations. Secondly, there is a need for skills development. Earlier I talked about interfaith as dialogue; to be able to take part in effective dialogue is itself a skill. It is not an impossible skill to acquire, but it does require a different set of muscles to critical analysis or debate. If one is initiating an interfaith project it is important to reflect that not everyone engaged in that process might have the skills to effectively and fully engage. Or, of potentially greater concern, that the dialogue descends into debate.

Finally, the challenge of action

Perhaps the most damning critique of interfaith is that it has no impact beyond the words that are spoken during the process. It is certainly true that interfaith initiatives often tread the fine line of having no other discernable output than a nice warm self satisfied glow.

Unsurprisingly, I would challenge that observation. When designed and delivered intentionally and effectively interfaith programming must have as its outcome something both more tangible and impactful.

If our analysis of the context has been sufficiently rigorous enabling identification of common issues of concern; if thought has been given to who the appropriate target groups and beneficiaries are; if we enter into the process in a spirit of mutual respect and

acknowledging the experience in the room; if we give time to ensuring that those involved with the process have the skills necessary to engage fully, and the skills and resources needed to emerge from a process of interfaith dialogue empowered to act, then interfaith dialogue must by definition be action orientated and capable of addressing some of the most seemingly complex and intractable issues confronting communities around the world.

Thank you.