



FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE

by owen mould

Well, its been a quiet week here on the Island. Especially quiet for a quiet Island on account of the weather, the holidays, and the recent faith-based initiative executed by the Island Interfaith Snooker and Boardgame Alliance.

You may well ask yourself, "For the sake of god, what on earth is that?" Reverend Spoonbred, of the Second Baptist Pentacostal Church said exactly that sort of thing, when he heard all about it. But soon found the Island Faith-Based Initiative such to his liking that he has pitched in whole heartedly to the program and cannot say enough about it and all the good it is doing.

Seems Pastor Nyquist of the Stern Lutheran Church of Grand Street fell into talking with Father Duran of the Church of Many Holy Names, which is located on the far side of the block when they chanced to take shelter together at the bus stop during one of those many recent downpours we have been having, for it had been the habit of the Catholic priest to take a walk about the block while

cogitating one of his notoriously pious sermons, while the good Lutheran Pastor had been doing the same for the past twenty-five years. And for twenty-five years the two had never exchanged any but the briefest pleasantries, for the Pastor had taken to walking the block counterclockwise, while the Priest had -- perhaps consciously -- taken to walking the block clockwise. So, although engaged in similar business on the same block, the two had not stood in either one's presence for a sum total of thirty-seconds, all in the form of brief "Good day!" and a short nod exchanged during that brief passage.

But due to the recent installation of bus shelters all over the island -- and with the primary shelters installed primarily on that particular block of Grand Street, this state of circumstances was about to change.

For who should be waiting at the corner of Santa Clara and Grand at that particular bus stop, but none other than the Rabbi Molochai Mendelnusse. The rain pelted down that day with such fury that the Priest's impermeable became thoroughly destroyed and so there he was. Well, what to talk about? Certainly this was not a place to engage in theological one-upmanship and one can talk about the weather only so much. Especially when things are pressing upon one's mind.

Furthermore a bus did arrive and the Rabbi stood up with his change in his hands. And never were more truthful words ever spoke. For who should descend at that moment but His Holiness Mustapha Omer Kemal, he of the Sacred Crescent Mosque down there on Santa Clara near Sixth Street. All there

stared in wonder to see Kemal descend to this place. This was not Kemal's stop; the bus had broken down.

Pastor Nyquist, seeking to prevent a potentially, um, explosive situation, commented, "Well, I think we can all thank God for this shelter, don't you think."

The priest had to agree. The others also. Several people on the bus, seeing through steam-fogged windows a priest, a rabbi, a Lutheran minister and a Mullah all together stared with abject fear and refused to exit the doors.

"Would that the congregation also felt the same way, " commented the priest, more to himself than to the others.

"Well," said the Mullah, whose eyes had been drawn, perhaps by the Great Adversary, to the headlines of the SF Chronicle blaring from the newspaper kiosk, not everyone is a full believer."

Oh here we go, the age old battles are about to start up again in a moment. Until the Rabbi spoke.

"Oy, and the Jews are the worst."

The minister, the priest and the Mullah looked at him.

"They are terrible. Such trouble they put me through for thirty years, with all of their craziness instead of coming to services. And when they do, such disrespect. They break the sabbath time making all kinds of misheposh again and again, when its yontif they should be making. Then they show up all nice after such sin the night before with drinking and such behavior as shames the names of their families. I am not a tzadik; look at me -- no better than a handyman."

Father Duran caught his breath after this outburst, before stating quite emphatically, "I know what you mean but don't blame yourself. My flock does the same thing. I give them the Word of god on Sunday, but on Saturday, they beat each other up in the bars, refuse to obey the sacrements and otherwise act abominably. . . ."

Pastor Nyquist, who had been looking sadder with every word, simply sat down heavily, saying, "This sounds all so terribly familiar." He then put his head on his hands that were folded on the top of his walking stick and burst into tears.

At this point the Mullah closed his mouth, which had been open for some time. Then it was his turn to speak. "My friends, all of us stand together equally affected by evil."

As it turned out from the ensuing discussion each one of these men of the cloth shared the same main problem about their respective congregations: they all went to services once a week, then went about their business cheerfully sinning all the rest of the days, fornicating, drinking, pride, gluttony, avarice, the whole works. When the rain stopped, the priest kindly invited them to tea in the secular meeting room behind the rectory and word has it they continued a great confab well into the night, in which there was much disputation of the theological kind. Before setting across the street, the Mullah commented, "He who stumbles but one step to god, will enjoy that god then takes two steps towards him."

The Rabbi rather liked that one, and asked permission to use it in his next public address. Permission granted.

All of this would have disappeared from the public consciousness, for the replacement bus eventually arrived, the passengers reembarked and the soggy corner was left behind in the minds of many, but for what happened next Friday night.

Things were in full swing in McGrath's pub, with Alex slinging the Guinness as fast as he could stack them and Peter roaming about rubbing his hands among the rowdy crowds just starting the weekend and the fiddler just warming up. In back, the pleasant crack of the balls clacked over a game of snooker and a pair of lads threw darts at the board placed over the Union Jack. Yes it was a jolly, noisy evening at McGrath's on the Island as usual.

It was then the doors flew back admitting a gust of wind and a chill in the air. The candles all dimmed and the sound of an organ intoning a deep A minor filled the room, although the band was Strictly Bluegrass with all acoustic instruments. The electric lights sputtered, then flickered. Then the candles blew out entirely. A figure appeared in the doorway, wings of a robe or a cape flapping in the wind with the dim light of the streetlight shining behind.

"Oh mah gawd, seasons don't fear the Reaper!" Charlene said, clutching fearfully at her throat.

Other figures appeared behind the first and Patrick picked up his Kerry stick ready to die for his pub and his people. Oh things did not look good indeed for what strange apparition made such an appearance!

But Patrick had seen the Troubles and rough times indeed, playing as a busker in the tube stations in all the great cities of the world. Well he knew the

trash cans of the Paris Metro where sometimes a decent crust could be had.

Patrick had fire in his belly, he had come a long way and if this be a ghost, this ghost would get such a thwack as to send him right back to the supernatural underworld, and be damned.

Then the voice spoke out of the impenetrable darkness. "Oy gevalt! What means this kugel of a cudgel? Is this any way to assault your guests in coming?"

The lights came back on and in trooped Rabbi Mendelnusse, Father Duran, Pastor Nyquist, and the Mullah, followed by Minister James N'gawa of the Storefront Baptist Church, and Rinpoche Wei Sic Mao, of the Peoples Temple of Tibet, and a number of others besides, for the others, having heard of this grand plan to save souls, could not abide being left out of it. There were Methodists, Ecumenicals, three sorts of nuns, two different Buddhist sects, Hindus, of the Sikh persuasion, 7th Day Adventists, a couple of nattily dressed Mormons, a brace of Watchtower Witnesses, a couple Home of Truth Unitarians, and one lonely Secular Humanist.

What'll ya have," asked Alex.

A number of mineral waters were ordered as the clergy began breaking out the checkerboards and mumbly-pegs on the scattered tables. It was then Peter laid down the house rules, principally that there was a five dollar cover charge. For the band, of course.

"Any other rules you have mister?", Minister N'gawa asked.

"No fightin' in my bar. You get along or I throw you out. We want no trouble here."

Well, its been that way ever since, with the clergy showing up unannounced at randomly selected establishments all over the Island every Friday and Saturday since. For once they realized that their respective differences were essentially meaningless and egotistical in the face of the common message, all the different brands of this and that put aside their quibbles about popes and virgin births and meccas so as to at the very least, try and save a soul or two. Everywhere they go, they set up their checkerboards and card games of fish and mumbly-peg and for that night in that place there is no swearing, no drunkenness and no cheating at snooker. No one knows how long this is going to last or if the Hari Krishnas will be allowed to join. But it is all great fun mixing the sacred and the profane.

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Eventually, the "faith-based initiative" to clean up the bars on the Island and bring folks back into the fold, well, it all fell apart. You had to know that a coalition of Presbyterians, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Islamic Mullahs, and Baptists just would not fly very far. It all fell apart when a dispute arose inside the snug of the Old Same Place as to whether it were possible to consecrate a slice of carrot cake and a glass of beer. Body and blood of god, you see.

It was Charlene who brought up the subject. Charlene always had been a handful. Charlene attended – when she had a mind to do so on the odd year – the more liberal Lutheran church down on Central where the Pastor Moderne held forth with the “red book” – you know, the one with all the contemporary hymns nobody really knows in there. A rock band would perform during services

and their annual representation at the 4th of July Mayor's Parade was notorious for the concupescence of its marching girls, all wearing leather boots and miniskirts. They certainly had a missionary spirit. Melinda went there for a while, for she was a rebellious teen, but she soon returned screaming to the relatively sedate shadow of Pastor Nyquist, saying, "They aint Lutherans! They're some kinda weird cult!"

In any case Charlene had been the town's Woman in Red for a long time, since way back when the Navy was here. Now time had passed, and time can be a terrible avenger. No longer the darling of the Officer's Club, batting eyes flirtatiously at admirals and sleek cadets, always carrying an extra pair of hose and underwear in her handbag, she now lived on reduced means and depended largely upon the misplaced kindness of strangers. And so also her once formidable weaponry, her feminine arsenal of such power had reduced with time and time's UN inspectors had enforced a gradual reduction of nuclear capability, leaving her at the last with a still firey tendency towards devilment and general stirring up of the . . . um . . . muck. Yes, the old gal still possessed a twinkle in her eye.

Well, the Mullah would have none of the beer involved in anything like a hypothetical consecration and the wine was worse. And then the Priest and the Pastor Nyquist had to get their two cents in about the hypothetical nature of it or reality of it because the Rabbi didn't know anything about this and the Unitarians only muddied up the issue trying to link it all together so it made sense. Which it did not. Then Charlene had to get on the Priest about the "silly chastity" thing,

which Pastor Nyquist took quite naturally as an insult to his dear friend. The Rinpoche suggested, perhaps unwisely, that it were best to avoid any references to slaughtering – i.e., body, blood, etc. – and simply sit down to a nice plate of cabbage for all of these attachments to selfhood simply caused grief and misery which cabbage has never been known to do.

The Secular Humanist interjected a comment about digestion and cabbage *vis a vis* flesh, especially of the human origin. This failed to resolve the discussion peacefully.

The whole thing quickly degenerated into a atavistic fiasco of an argument with flailing limbs and brutal savagery, and as it is known, when theologians fall into argument, the rest of us suffer. Bottles were smashed and chairs broken and the entire company turned out into the street amid the wail of sirens and the revolving flash of police lights and the squawk of policecar PA systems. No, that evening did not end well and an end was put to the Island Faith-based Initiative.

At least one good thing came of all of this: Father Duran of the Church of Many Holy Names and Pastor Svenquist of the First Stern Lutheran Church remain on good terms in this improving weather and have been seen walking about the Grand Street block of churches, alternatively clockwise and anti-clockwise. It appears the two arch-enemies have become the best of friends.

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