

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

For Jews and Christians: A season to seek the light of wisdom



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For Christians and Jews, this weekend holds special significance.

The commercial and media world reminds us constantly that it is time to go to the store or the appropriate website to buy presents for everybody: family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, your hairdresser and your paperboy or girl (if you still get it delivered).

It is pervasive even if not spiritually persuasive.

Meanwhile, Christians try to hang on to the more significant components of the season by singing carols, going to choir concerts and attending services. Many churches will have a special service, vigil or Mass for Christmas Eve on Saturday. Remember the term Christmas comes from Christ Mass.

For Jews, what was once a relatively minor celebration, Hanukkah, has become more prominent, perhaps in part to counter the commercial attention to Christmas.

Each year, the Hanukkah celebration begins sometime in December, but because of the monthly nature of the Jewish calendar it rarely coincides exactly with Christmas.

This year is an exception and Hanukkah begins Dec. 24.

The two celebrations also feature "light." The candles of the menorah and the candles in the advent wreath illustrate this common theme. At this, the darkest time of the year (for the Northern Hemisphere), this seems appropriate and even comforting.

This year, I was invited to be a part of an ancient Christian tradition called the "Advent O Antiphons," a seven-day series that began Dec. 17 and leads us to Christmas Eve. It includes a candlelight procession, the singing of hymns and Psalms and reading and proclamation of Scripture. Each day focuses on a particular title or aspect in anticipation of the Christ. It begins with "O Wisdom" with readings from the books of Proverbs and Isaiah.

Speaking on the wisdom theme, and given my background in science, I reflected on the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Science has been a powerful tool for discerning knowledge in the physical world. There is no doubt our lives are significantly different thanks to the discoveries in medicine, communication, travel, etc. But has all of this knowledge of our physical world led to more wisdom? Are we wiser than Socrates, the author of Proverbs, or Jesus?

Jonas Salk, the scientist and discoverer of polio's cure, asked: "At one time we had wisdom, but little knowledge. Now we have a great deal of knowledge, but do we have enough wisdom to deal with that knowledge?"

It is a tragic observation that today science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.

Krista Tippett, host of the popular radio series "On Being," has discussed some of these issues with over 400 guests.

In her recent book, "Becoming Wise," she explores the mystery and art of living. She points to what is called the "Axial Age," which occurred a few centuries before our common Christian era.

Plato and Aristotle in Greece, Confucius in China, the Buddha in India and the Hebrew prophets in ancient Israel, all at about the same time but in their own countries and cultures, came to the startling proposition that the well-being of others beyond one's own tribe — namely the stranger, the orphan, the outcast — were linked to their own well-being.

In Tippett's words: "Humanity gave voice to the questions that have animated religion and philosophy ever since: What does it mean to be human? What matters in life? What matters in death? How to be of service

to each other and the world?"

These questions, raised centuries before the development of science and the modern pursuit of technology, still pertain today.

She also writes that the "religious and spiritual traditions have borne (this) wisdom across time." She cites Albert Einstein, who articulated a moral equation fully as important as his more famous mathematical equations. In her words, Einstein "began his life with a profound faith in the social good of the scientific enterprise."

However, he then "watched German science hand itself over to fascism," as chemists and physicists created weapons of mass destruction. He said that science in his generation had become "like a razor blade in the hands of a 3-year-old."

"He began to see figures such as Gandhi and Moses, Jesus and Buddha and St. Francis of Assisi, as what he called 'geniuses in the art of living.' He proposed that their qualities of spiritual genius were more necessary to the future of human dignity, security and joy than objective knowledge."

Whatever your tradition, in this dark season of the year, it is certainly a time to seek the light of goodwill to all, peace on earth, and respect and dignity for all persons.

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