

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Moral judgments in religion and politics



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“Whether or not you believe in God, religions accomplish something miraculous: They turn large numbers of people who are not kin into a group that is able to work together, trust each other and help each other. They are living embodiments of *e pluribus unum* (from many, one).” These are the words of Jonathan Haidt, leading author and a social psychologist at the University of Virginia.

Now whether that working together brings the establishing of hospitals and schools, feeding the poor and peacemaking, or whether it inspires armies or terrorist groups, is a topic much in our current discussion. Last week our Interfaith Consortium speaker, Scott Appleby, described how most religious traditions include a minority whose religious fervor can become extreme and even violent. This religious devotion, however, is often, and in fact usually, directed toward constructive goals. It is our task to direct the power and energy of religious commitment to the working together for the common good.

Jonathan Haidt has written two popular best-selling books, “The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom,” and “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion.” In both books he is not seeking to evaluate the truth of various religious claims, but to

understand how religious and moral beliefs form and the way in which the human mind evaluates the competing claims. Religion and morality are no longer the exclusive domain of the philosophers and theologians. Cognitive scientists, psychologists, political scientists, biologists and social psychologists are now bringing experimental and scientific findings to the topic.

Haidt’s work leads him to the conclusion that moral judgments are not the result of conscious moral reasoning. “When it comes to moral judgments, we think we are scientists discovering truth, but actually we are lawyers arguing for positions we arrived at by other means,” he said.

He uses the metaphor of an elephant and its rider. There are two cognitive processes involved. The rider is our reasoning process, while the much bigger elephant is the automatic emotional and intuitive process. The elephant or intuitive process is better at making immediate decisions, especially regarding potential threats. If we spend too much time trying to evaluate that strange sound we hear, it just might be too late. We act rapidly and instinctively. “The rider is skilled at fabricating post-hoc explanations for whatever the elephant has just done, and it is good at finding reasons to justify whatever the elephant wants to do next.”

This is why appealing to logic, statistics, and facts will not often change the mind on moral issues or political positions. Haidt puts it this way: “If you want to change people’s minds, you’ve got to talk to their ele-

phants.” We need to address the emotional and intuitive side of a person as the way to introduce dialogue and further discussion. As Henry Ford is quoted: “If there is one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from their angle as well as from your own.” It’s a good lesson for anyone interested in interfaith understanding or progress in the political process.

CREATING ‘MORAL COMMUNITIES’

When it comes to religion he admits: “I used to be very hostile to religion. And then, in doing this research on moral psychology and ... looking at the social science evidence on the effects of religion, well, it’s pretty clear ... (I)n the United States, where we have a competitive marketplace and religions compete for adherence ... they create moral communities that encourage people to not just focus on themselves.”

In an interview with Krista Tippett, Haidt explains how his research led him away from a polarization that led to anger. “The feeling of losing my anger was thrilling. It was really freeing. When you get people to actually understand each other, and they let down their guard, and they learn something new, and they see humanity in someone that they disliked or hated or demonized before, that’s really thrilling. And that, I think, is one of the most important emotional tools we have to foster civility. Because once you get it started, it’s kind of addictive.”

This has been our mission for interfaith

understanding, and it has taken many forms. Yes, there have been conferences and educational programs, but we have also fostered dinners, visits to other places of worship and developing personal relationships around common interests. Haidt urges us to “do the long, slow work of getting people to have something of a human relationship — and especially, sharing food is a very visceral, primal thing. Once you’ve eaten, shared food with a person, there’s a deep psychological system that means ‘We are like family.’”

As families gather for Thanksgiving next week, let us apply these lessons by relating at the emotional and intuitive level and approach our differences from the perspective of seeing it “from the other person’s point of view.”

For interfaith perspectives and developing relationships consider two events this coming weekend in Grand Rapids: an interfaith concert and an interfaith Thanksgiving celebration. See our website, interfaithunderstanding.org for details.

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Interfaith Thanksgiving events

Interfaith Concert: Trinity United Methodist Church, Sunday at 3 p.m.

Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration: Trinity Lutheran Church. Monday at 7 p.m.