

## INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

# How can we move beyond mere tolerance?

**Note:** In 2012, MLive.com was a partner in the Year of Interfaith Understanding. The success of that project led to an ongoing effort to build interfaith understanding in Michigan. This column, *Interfaith Insights*, is one such effort. It is coordinated by Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University, and will be written by Kindschi and others in the interfaith community.

By Douglas Kindschi

Last week, we talked about truth, humility and the danger of relativism. While we affirm what we believe to be true, we do it in a spirit of humility.

In a similar vein, Paul Mendes-Flohr, a professor at the University of Chicago, recently gave a talk on “The Promise and Limitations of Interfaith



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of course I can show tolerance, but it is at the expense of relativizing your beliefs and practices. It actually is an insult to your faith.

While this might be a step above a tolerance, which merely avoids doing physical harm, it still is a very limited stance. If we treat religious belief as relative and without any truth claims, then the differences are not worth a fight, or for that matter even serious discussion. One can be tolerant to the point of not caring about truth. Mendes-Flohr calls this skeptical

Dialogue.” He began with a quote from Goethe: “To tolerate is to insult. Tolerance must only be preparatory to open the way to mutual acceptance.”

If I have no commitment to truth, then

pluralism, or even a “laissez-faire conception of tolerance.”

The Abrahamic faiths claim revealed knowledge and make truth claims about reality. For such faith commitments, revealed truths are an intrinsic aspect of that reality. Can we consider such truth claims without reducing them to relativism, which leads to denying all truth?

Mendes-Flohr addresses this concern in relation to Martin Buber, who was the Jewish editor of an interfaith journal published in the 1920s titled “Die Kreatur” (“The Creature”). For Buber, we must seek to encounter the other as a “thou,” an “irreducibly unique presence.” While we are not God, we are not mere things. True respect and acceptance recognize the other as a divine creation with whom one shares “a creatureliness.”

We acknowledge there is ultimate truth but in our own finite creatureli-

ness, we acknowledge we do not possess the ultimate truth. This kind of respect can lead to acceptance of the other as a truth seeker, but, like oneself, not perfect in understanding.

This reminds me of the concept of “holy envy” from Krister Stendahl, former dean at Harvard School of Divinity, bishop of the Church of Sweden and one of the early presenters at the Interfaith Dialogues in Muskegon. He urged that our dialogue be so respectful and open to new insight that we would experience holy envy — that is, being “willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and wish could, in some way, be reflected in your own” religion.

It certainly is a tolerance that goes beyond avoiding hate speech and violence, but also is much more than cultural relativism. It is respect.

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