

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Reaching beyond tolerance to hospitality

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Often when people talk about interfaith they use the term "tolerance."

We must tolerate people who are different, especially those of a different religion. While there are some places in the world in which tolerance is a necessary



goal, tolerance is such a minimal step. When treating a cancer by chemotherapy, we talk about how much poison the body can tolerate before killing the patient, not just the cancer cells. Tolerance is a minimal goal. It basically means not doing someone harm; it is the avoidance of violence.

In his book "When Faiths Collide," religion historian Martin Marty urges us to take what he calls the risky step of hospitality.

He points out the term hospitality comes from the Latin word "hospitare," which refers to a stranger. It is the same Latin term that led to the word hospital, which goes back to the time when doctors treated the patients in their homes.

But a stranger or traveller who happens to get sick would need a place to recover and be treated. Thus hospitals were created to care for the stranger who could not be treated in the home. Marty says we must go beyond mere tolerance and actually treat kindly the person who is not like us.

It is important to note this care of the stranger is a part of most religious traditions. For example, the Torah of Judaism commands:

■ "When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The stranger who lives with you shall be treated like the native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Leviticus 19:33).

Likewise in the Christian tradition, the Gospels report Jesus saying:

■ "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance... For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." (Matthew 25:34-35)

From the Muslim tradition we find the following:

■ "Be kind to parents, and the near kinsman, and to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbor who is of kin, and to the neighbor who is a stranger." (Qur'an 4:36)

These three traditions have their origins in the Middle East where hospitality is an important part of the culture.

Because of the desert environment where travel was dangerous, the code of caring for the stranger was vital to survival. While in modern times the travel conditions are not as treacherous, the practice of hospitality survives.

We had the good fortune to travel in the past few months in Israel/Palestine, Turkey and in the country of Oman. This practice of hospitality was apparent wherever we went.

These Abrahamic faiths also teach that each person is created in God's image. Stranger or not, we are called to see in each person the image of God.