

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Reflections on interfaith dialogue from a Jewish perspective

Note: This column is part of an ongoing effort to build interfaith understanding in Michigan. It is coordinated by Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

By Sheldon J. Kopperl

The idea of participating in the 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding intrigued me for a variety of reasons. I had much to learn from the Grand Rapids Christian community in its diverse forms as well as from the increasingly large Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist populations. As a lay educator at Temple Emanuel in GR and a faculty



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member of the Religious Studies Program at GVSU, I had lots of questions for people of other faith traditions.

From Christians, I wanted a model of the Holy Trinity that I as a strict monotheist could explain to my 10th-grade religious school students. I also wondered what role Scripture plays in the daily lives of Christians who are not biblical scholars or particularly evangelical in their relationships with non-Christians.

From Muslims, I was eager to discuss the similarities

between our two faiths and how most religious Muslims study the Quran.

I also was curious about how the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures played a role in the daily lives of practitioners of these Eastern faiths.

As a Jew, I was eager to discuss our traditions with my interfaith partners. With a deep interest in authoritative Jewish texts from the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) to the Rabbinic interpretations found in the Talmuds and Midrashim (post-biblical interpretations of the Bible), I wished to share my love of texts and to compare the writings of Christianity and Islam.

Many of the activities in which I participated

allowed members of different religions to share text interpretations in informal settings. The most significant for me was Table Talk, the monthly dinners sponsored by the Dominican Sisters of Marywood. Speakers of four faiths briefly exchanged views on a certain common theme that changed each time, followed by informal discussion among attendees representing different faith traditions. I learned a lot about the different religions and was able to share some of my traditions with others as a speaker and participant.

Another interesting exercise in self-awareness as well as awareness of other faiths was Scriptural Reasoning,

where participants presented texts from their traditions and indicated what that text meant to them as a worshipper who holds that text sacred. For those of us in the academic environment, it was surprisingly difficult to express feelings we have for the text, rather than what we can learn in an intellectual way from the text.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

My personal reaction to the Year of Interfaith Understanding was elation that Grand Rapids and the larger West Michigan community had changed considerably since my wife and I arrived here in 1970. Pride in religious diversity is actively,

if not yet completely, replacing Roman Catholic and Calvinist hegemony in religious discussions and events. I became an outspoken and sought-after teacher of the Jewish tradition to people of other faiths. Fellow Jews who sought dialogue opportunities enjoyed and learned from their participation as much as I did. By the end of 2012, the Jewish community could and can now feel like a real partner in West Michigan.

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