

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Loving the stranger: Being true to our religious teachings

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Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, in his latest book, "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence," makes the case that human beings are tribal by nature. We need groups to survive, and it is built into our evolution to identify with groups.

Sacks explains: "We form groups. We are tribal beings. We are divided into different nations, languages, cultures and codes, and these are the bases of identity. There is no such thing as humanity in the abstract, just as there is no such thing as language or literature or love in the abstract. Identity is inescapably plural. ... It divides the world into Us and Them."



Kindschi

This division often leads to violence formed from fear of the other. It also leads to rejection of the stranger in our midst. It violates the basic teachings of all of our religions as well as the common sense of decency. It leads us to reject the immigrant and the refugee.

The story of leaving one's land and going to another, strange land is a common one in many religious traditions. Abraham is told by God, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Shortly thereafter we read, "Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien for the famine was severe in the land." (Genesis 12:1 and 10) In a similar way, we read in Matthew of Joseph taking Mary and Jesus to Egypt for fear of violence from King Herod. They were refugees leaving their country because of lack of food or fear of violence and death.

WELCOME AND ACCEPTANCE

Sound familiar? We now see almost daily the story of people risking their lives to find safety and the possibility of food and housing for their families.

They might be strangers in our land, but our religious traditions and our faith tell us to welcome them.

The Hebrew Scriptures say, "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 read, "Be kind to parents, and to 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." (Quran 4:36)

While Europe is receiving millions of refugees, we in America will admit only a few thousand. And yet, there are those who would foment fear with calls to reject the immigrant and the refugee, especially those from the Middle East. Will we affirm our nation's historical openness to those in need? Will we heed the message from our faith traditions?

It is time for a positive message to be stated strongly — a message of responding to those in need, those seeking peace and security.

In West Michigan, residents have the opportunity to learn more about refugee resettlement at a community event March 8. Social service agencies as well as faith groups and others wanting to help will gather at the

IF YOU GO**WELCOMING REFUGEES:
DO UNTO OTHERS**

A conversation of community engagement about refugee resettlement:

When: 7 p.m. March 8

Where: Catholic Information Center, 360 S. Division Ave., Grand Rapids

More information: interfaithunderstanding.org

Catholic Information Center, 360 S. Division Ave., Grand Rapids, at 7 p.m. to learn how our community can truly be a welcoming community. More information is on our website, interfaith-understanding.org

As Rabbi Sacks put it, "Can we recognize God's image in one who is not in my image?" If we are to be true to our faith traditions, we will welcome the stranger and the refugee.