

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Religious inspiration and understanding found through the arts, senses

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The Kaufman Interfaith Institute has collaborated with Actors' Theatre on their current production of "Grace." The play is a stimulating exploration of issues relating to science and religion as well as interfaith understanding.

Grace, a scientist, calls herself a naturalist who does not believe in God and is nearly violent in her opposition to all religion. The stage is set when her lawyer son, Tom, decides to become an Anglican priest. Her Jewish husband is not hostile to the idea even though he finds it ironic his son would be a priest with the

name Friedman. The fourth person in the play is Tom's friend, Ruth, whom he loves, a sentiment that is reciprocated in spite of their religious differences.

As the scientist, Grace wants everything to be based on empirical data and rational analysis.

Tom calls himself enlightened and religious, taking his religious belief to be more realistic than a sterile scientific approach to the world. He uses the analogy of language for religion. Speaking English does not imply that French is not true, it's just a different language. Interfaith issues can be seen in a similar way. To use a language to make sense of the world does not mean a different language is invalid or false.

There are, of course, languages that seem to work better for certain purposes that might not be useful in other settings. Mathematics is useful in many of the sciences but doesn't make for good poetry or writing love letters. Scientific language and method has made great strides in understanding the physical world but doesn't help us find meaning or purpose in life. Nor does it explain what it is to be moral or to recognize beauty.

Science seeks not only to be empirical and rational, but also presents its results in visual form. You don't express or understand a scientific theory by listening or touching or smelling or through movement. Yet those

other senses are often used in religious expression. Scripture is often heard or sung. Certain rites involve smelling incense or tasting, such as in the Eucharist or ceremonial meals. To me, this is symbolic of the broader scope of understanding that religion seeks. It uses all the senses.

Like our attempts to express love or beauty, a strictly rational approach to life just doesn't work. We need poetry, music, art, dance and even flowers to express these aspects of reality. Strict reductionist science will not do the job. Similarly, the issues religion addresses and communicates require multiple ways of expression.

In the play, Tom describes his

experience as being like Moses going up the mountain to meet God. In the Hebrew Scriptures we read: "And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud.'" (Exodus 19:9)

We must resist the temptation to conceive of God in our own finite human terms. Our relationship might be more like the cloud in which God is more mysterious than we could ever imagine. Could it be that the closer we get to God the less clearly our finite minds can understand? Could it be that we become less arrogant and more humble? Or as Christian Scripture puts it, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face." (1 Corinthians 13:12)