

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Interpreting scriptures: The problem of exclusivity

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One of the sources of conflict among religions is the claim of exclusivity. There are certainly texts in the three Abrahamic religions that have been used to make such a claim. There are verses in the Jewish Scriptures that refer to the "chosen people." For example we read, "It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the LORD set His heart on you and chose you — indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because the LORD favored you and kept the oath He made to your fathers ..." (Deuteronomy 7:7-8)



Kindschi

Likewise Christians claim exclusivity with quotes from Jesus such as "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6) Muslims who want a verse from the Quran that makes that faith exclusive can quote, "So whoever seeks religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be one of the losers in the Hereafter." (Quran 3:85)

When a single text is taken literally, without context and interpretation it can, indeed, be the source of conflict and claims that one religion is the only true religion. There are, however, many texts from the same scriptures that set forth a more inclusive understanding of God's relationship to humanity. The book, "Religion Gone Astray: What We found at the Heart of Interfaith,"

is written by Rabbi Ted Falcon, Pastor Don Mackenzie and Imam Jamal Rahman. I had the privilege of hearing them speak at the Parliament of the World's Religions last fall. They address the problem of claiming one and only one truth but also point out the more inclusive texts in their respective scriptures.

Later in the Hebrew experience, the prophets clearly called for repentance and a more inclusive understanding. "It has been told you, humankind, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Christians can point to the openness and acceptance that Jesus showed to the Syrophenician woman who wanted her daughter healed (Matthew 15:21-28).

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the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:8-10) and even the Roman centurion who represented the occupying forces but requested healing for his servant (Matthew 8:5-13). When asked by the lawyers how one can receive eternal life, his response was to love God and love your neighbor. When further asked who his neighbor was, Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan, a person from another religious and ethnic

tradition.

Likewise, in the Quran there are passages that affirm the understandings of the prophets from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses to Jesus, as bringing truth. "We make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves." (Quran 3:84)

The fact that one can find texts that argue a particular view does not settle the conflict, and that is why the core teachings and historical interpretations are so vital in understanding any religious tradition. Furthermore, as we have suggested in earlier Insights, it is best to understand a religion from its adherents, not its enemies. This is a call for interfaith dialogue, getting to know people from other traditions and learning from them through respect.