

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# A secular perspective on service: Build bridges, not walls

*As a part of the Year of Interfaith Service this is the fifth in a series of Insights on various religious perspectives on service.*

**By Ed Brayton**

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**I**n October, a soup kitchen in Spartanburg, South Carolina, refused to allow the Upstate Atheists to help prepare and serve meals to the homeless.

The soup kitchen leader said she would resign before she would let an atheist into her kitchen.

In November, the Kansas City Atheist Coalition was told by a mission its members could not help deliver meals on Thanksgiving to the needy as they had done for years.

These situations are unfortunate and are a symptom, I think, of how we tend to build walls between us rather than bridges.

We spend a lot of time drawing lines between our religious “tribes,” but I believe there is an important shared principle found in all the great religions and in secular humanism, which is my philosophy.

It’s called karma in the Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh faiths. It’s called the Golden Rule in Christianity. It’s also found in the writings of Confucius and in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Philosophers sometimes call it

the principle of reciprocity.

Service to others is one of the five pillars of Islam. In Buddhism, the idea of Dana or Daan is the cultivation of generosity. The Hebrew Scriptures contain hundreds of verses about the importance of helping the poor and the needy.

And my favorite passage in the New Testament is when Jesus tells his followers, “Whatever you do to the least of these, my brethren, you do unto me also.”

Even as an atheist, I find that to be a powerful statement of human compassion.

We should treat others well because we wish to be treated well. We should seek justice for others because we want justice for ourselves. We should protect the rights of others because we

want our own rights protected.

Our shared humanity demands it. And, I believe, we spend far too much of our time and energy dividing ourselves on the basis of religion rather than uniting around this basic principle that we should be able to agree on.

A year ago, I had the opportunity to represent the Center for Inquiry — Michigan, a 17-year old secular humanist organization in Grand Rapids, at an interfaith Thanksgiving service.

In my brief talk, I suggested to the leaders of many religious communities there that we go beyond getting together once a year to say nice things to one another; that we join forces throughout the year on service projects that alleviate human suffering and improve the lives

of those in our community.

Now, with the 2015 — Year of Interfaith Service, we can join our efforts, not only this year, but in the future to provide service to our community.

I believe Grand Rapids can provide a powerful counterexample to what happened in Spartanburg and Kansas City.

Rather than letting our religious differences divide us, we can, and should, allow our shared values of compassion and service to others bring us together to make our community a better place for all of us, regardless of our religious positions.

The effectiveness of our efforts can only be magnified if we build bridges rather than walls between us.

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