

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Putting God second? Is that the answer to religious violence?

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The Kaufman Interfaith Institute's Triennial Jewish/Christian/Muslim Dialogue last week addressed the theme, "To Repair the World: How Does Religion Help or Hinder?"

Three prominent scholars tackled the question from their respective faith traditions.

The first presentation from Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, set forth the provocative theme "Putting God Second."

Based on the argument from his upcoming book by that name, he suggests religion has a self-defeating feature that we must take seriously.

He compared it to an autoimmune disease where the body cannot do what it wants and needs to do.

For religion, it is "a diagnosis that describes the dynamics

through which religions so often undermine their own deepest values and attack their self-professed goals," Hartman said. "While God obligates the good and calls us into its service ... God simultaneously and inadvertently makes us morally blind. ... The human religious desire to live in relationship with God often distracts religion's adherents from their traditions' core moral truths."

He described two features of this religious disease — God Intoxication and God Manipulation. In our desire to experience God fully, it is possible to see God only and not see the "other" or our ethical responsibilities.

God manipulation occurs when we think that we know best what God wants and take it upon ourselves to fight against

God's enemies in ways that violate basic human values.

Hartman related his ideas to the exchange between Abraham and God regarding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah recorded in Genesis 18.

While Abraham lived many years before Moses brought the law and commandment, Jewish scripture says Abraham was singled out to "keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just."

Furthermore, when God discloses his plan of destruction, Abraham argues with God regarding the justice of bringing destruction on the innocent, as well as the guilty.

The rest of the story is the negotiation between God and Abraham regarding how one does what is right and just.

The Christian speaker, Rev. Dr. Cynthia Campbell, former president of McCormick Theological Seminary and current pastor in Louisville, gave us a very

sobering review of the passages in both testaments of the Bible where violence is described and even celebrated.

One must be vigilant, she urged, to understand scripture in its context, as well as to not confuse description of what happened with what is commanded.

The other problem is the historical theological focus on orthodoxy vs. heresy.

When orthodoxy is attached to power, the results can often be violence and elimination of the "other" for the cause of right thinking or right belief.

She cited the parable of Jesus from Matthew 25 of the separation of the sheep from the goats. Both groups saw the needy, the hungry, thirsty, sick and the stranger, but one group responded and the other did not.

But neither recognized that it was in their response to these the "least of these" that they were being judged.

Campbell concluded that

claims to right thinking (orthodoxy) need to be judged "by their fruits: do theological ideas lead to life or death, human flourishing or extinction?"

Dr. Ingrid Mattson, chair of Islamic Studies at the University of Western Ontario and former president of the Islamic Society of North America, affirmed that all Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the divine Word of God, but that does not mean all agree on interpretation.

She gave examples from the early disputes following the death of Muhammad as well passages from the Qur'an that speak of the importance of knowledge, the use of our intellect and signs from creation.

Diversity and innate morality were also affirmed.

By many reports this year's dialogue was the most stimulating and productive in the series' 23-year history. Video will soon be at our website, [interfaithunderstanding.org](http://interfaithunderstanding.org).



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