

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Spirituality and social justice: modeling ways of coming together

By Katie Gordon

Program manager
of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute

This past week, two events explored the topic of spirituality and social justice. The first, at the Dominican Center at Marywood, featured Sikh, Jewish and Christian perspectives. The second, at Aquinas College, highlighted Muslim, Christian and Hindu perspectives.



Gordon

It was beautiful to hear the various articulations of what justice means to each worldview and tradition. I think it was perhaps even more beautiful to imagine the coalitions possible when we use our distinct traditions and shared values to work

toward a common good.

On the first night, Rishi Makkar, a member of the local Sikh community, shared how his tradition was founded as a response to social injustices of its time. In northern India in the late 15th century, Sikhism was established as a religion that brought people together rather than separating them based on gender, class or religion. Not only that, but the defining characteristics of Sikhs — such as their turbans, kirpans (small daggers) and karas (bracelets) — are meant to be a sort of spiritual armor.

The next night, Fred Stella looked to his religion of Hinduism, and particularly someone who exemplifies his tradition's call for justice — Mahatma Gandhi. He reminded us that Gandhi viewed a personal wholeness, an inner coherence,

to be essential to his outward activism and leadership. This inner change for outer change, as Fred reminds us, makes both transformations — personal and political — more meaningful.

Gandhi also is an example of how to be inspired by a different tradition while retaining your beliefs. Much of Gandhi's non-violence was informed by the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, and while that deeply informed his work, he was able to appreciate the lessons of Jesus while remaining a Hindu.

Ironically, Gandhi, a Hindu, inspired Martin Luther King Jr., a Christian, to more deeply consider the nonviolent calling of Jesus. This exchange of ideas and values made Gandhi and King a better Hindu and better Christian, respectively.

Finally, it seems appropriate to end with a reflection from the

Catholic perspective, since they were conveners and panelists at both events. Mary Clark-Kaiser, a follower of Catholic Social Teaching and a spiritual director to many students at Aquinas College, cited the importance not just of charity work, but systems change work.

She referenced Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, as someone who lived out the value of doing more than service, doing justice.

Day likely would agree with Dom Helder Camara, a Brazilian Roman Catholic archbishop of the 20th century, who famously said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

Justice work is easily politicized and polarized. But as we experienced during these events, there is still more upon which

we agree — despite our religious and political differences — than there is upon which we disagree.

Unfortunately, it is easier for us to call out differences and divisions than to celebrate shared values and points of unity.

However, through interfaith dialogues such as these, by discovering the roots of our traditions and the directions they are headed, we can learn and be enriched by one another.

Further, we can model a method of coming together and appreciating particularities along with commonalities, that can help us work together on issues of grave concern — not just for our own tribes, but for all humanity.

After all, it is not only our senses of spirituality and justice that are both deeply personal and deeply shared. It is also our lives, our communities and our world.