

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## A scientist/theologian's insight on interfaith dialogue

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My time at Cambridge University, now coming to an end, has been most stimulating both for the insights in science and religion, as well as the interfaith experiences.

Another aspect of my stay at Westminster College, a college in the Reformed tradition that trains future ministers, has been the daily morning prayers and brief prayer liturgy prior to lunch. While not required of students (or visitors), it has become an important part of the rhythm during our stay here. They are, of course, very Christian in content and form, but I have been struck by a portion of one of the prayers said in the pre-lunch lit-



Kindschi

urgy that goes:

"Gracious God, if we came to your house, we would find the door open because there are no closing hours for the hospitality of heaven. If we came to your house, we would hear many accents, ours just one among them, for there is no favored nation in the commonwealth of heaven. If we came to your house, we would see people who never thought they would be allowed in, had the entrance been by merit rather than by your gracious invitation."

This prayer resonates with the interfaith work with which I have been involved over these past years through the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. It also was in keeping with my fortnightly conversations with the scientist and theologian John Polkinghorne, whom I referenced in some of my earlier Insight columns. In the final chapter of his recent book, "Science and Religion in

Quest of Truth," he briefly discusses "Other Faiths." He notes if you ask scientists from three different continents about some aspect of the natural world you will likely get similar responses. But ask the same three persons about the nature of Ultimate Reality, and you will likely get very different responses.

He writes: "It is no longer possible to dismiss people of other faiths as strange persons in far-away countries who believe peculiar things. They are our neighbors, living down the street, and we can see the spiritual integrity of their lives. ... What is clear is that all the world faith traditions are all testifying to a realm of human experience that can be characterized as encounter with sacred Reality."

**THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE**

Polkinghorne acknowledges the real differences in beliefs and claims, as well as the complexity

of the issues involved in meaningful dialogue. It is the task for our century to pursue this dialogue. He offers three observations, from a Christian perspective, on how we might proceed.

First, given his scientific background, he suggests, we not start with the most confrontational issues in relation to the traditions' core beliefs, but rather explore how those beliefs "relate to the insights of modern science ... that can yield constructive interaction without provoking immediate frustrating defensiveness."

Second, Polkinghorne warns against seeking agreement by trying to construct a "lowest-common-denominator world religion, formed by collecting what the faiths are found to have in common." He acknowledges that there are areas of commonality, such as the value of compassion and the experience of the spiritual, but the "mutual

incompatibilities will have to be faced."

In Grand Rapids during our Year of Interfaith Understanding we called this "thick dialogue" as opposed to a "thin dialogue" that narrowed our faith so much that we could all agree.

Polkinghorne finally points out that the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit is also called the "Spirit of truth" and is "I believe, at work in all truth-seeking communities." He sees this as a way to honor the spiritual authenticity of other faith traditions and "as a way for the Christian to understand and honor that authenticity."

My time in Cambridge, and especially my contact with Polkinghorne and his writings, have enhanced my science/religion understanding and provided helpful insights into my interfaith endeavor. It has indeed been enriching.

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