

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Pursuing wisdom, not victories of logic



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"Do I have to be wrong in order for you to be right?"

This was the question asked by the Jewish scholar to the Christian scholar back in the early days of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue. Sylvia Kaufman began this dialogue in Muskegon back in the 1980s. It later led to the establishment of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

This is the time of the year when the question is asked again as we look at the Jewish origins of Christianity. When the Christmas story is read from the Gospel of Matthew, there can be no question about the connection. Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus starting with Abraham and proceeding down through King David to Joseph. It continues with quotes from various prophets of the coming Messiah, the Hebrew word meaning "anointed one," translated as Christ in Greek.

The book of Luke also tells the genealogy, again going back through David and Abraham and then on to Adam. According to this narrative, Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Joseph had traveled there for a required government enrollment since he was of "the house and lineage of David." It goes on to tell of his circumcision, his presentation in the temple and the required sacrifice in Jerusalem, "according to the law of

Moses." (Luke 2:22-24)

Greg Carey, professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, writes that his students must roll their eyes at how often he asks them to fill in the blank: "Jesus was a ..." "Jew."

"And Peter was a ..." "Jew." And also, Mary and Paul. "This is the simple point — that the New Testament's key figures all lived and died as Jews."

Yes, it is a simple point, but one that Jews and Christians often fail to acknowledge: Jesus was a Jew.

The Christian Bible tells the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many more, while we Christians often fail to appreciate that these biblical heroes were Jews, not Christians. It has been said that this is one fact that Jews and Christians are reluctant to affirm: "Jesus was a Jew."

And yet in that dialogue question between the Jewish and Christian scholars, the assumption is that only one of them could be right. If one was right, the other had to be wrong.

LOGIC NOT ALWAYS THE BEST TOOL

I would suggest that the problem was Aristotle and Greek logic. If we see life in terms of propositions, facts, and the binary choice of true or false, then logic is a valuable tool. If I am primarily interested in the truth or falsity of certain facts — $2+2=4$, Lansing is

the capital of Michigan, viruses cause colds — then the laws of logic are important.

In logic, it is called the law of the excluded middle: a proposition is either true or false. It is important to know many facts and it is important to know if they are true or false. We learn them from our parents and teachers, we read about them in books.

But when we approach important issues of love, beauty and morality, the logic of explicit facts will often not serve us well. In matters of meaning and how to live, perhaps the category we need is wisdom rather than propositional or creedal truth. If, as religious people, we can affirm that God's truth is beyond mere mortals' full comprehension, then why do we think we can know with certainty what God knows or how God will interact with God's creatures?

Wisdom is not a binary concept. We cannot say with a black-or-white logic what is the best way to resolve a dispute, counsel a distraught friend or make a difficult moral choice. These issues will not stand up to a true-or-false test. They call for wisdom.

Is it not time in our relating to a diversity of religious traditions and communities to ask the wisdom question? Not so much which proposition, creed or belief is true, and which is false, but what can we learn from each other to grow in wisdom about how to live and treat each other? Are we facing a crisis of truth, or a crisis of wisdom?

Science has given us many truths about the physical world, and we proudly talk of "modern science" and its accomplishments. But where is "modern wisdom"?

WISDOM LAGS BEHIND KNOWLEDGE

Jonas Salk, the scientist and discoverer of the polio vaccine, asked: "At one time we had wisdom, but little knowledge. Now we have a great deal of knowledge, but do we have enough wisdom to deal with that knowledge?"

It is a tragic observation that today science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.

While the binary approach of logic seeks to resolve difference as either true or false, wisdom grows when we see both sides of an issue, when we learn from difference. Wisdom grows with experience and knows that a final resolution may not be possible.

In this season of light, when Jews and Christians conclude their celebrations of Hanukkah and Advent, can we enlighten each other with wisdom on how to live? Rather than forcing the issue of who is right and who is wrong, can we celebrate what we learn from each other?

For Jews, Christians, and all persons of goodwill, rather than pursuing the resolution of truth through propositional logic, let us pursue wisdom that emerges from love.

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