

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Learn from other faiths; seek common ground



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In the world of the internet, it is fascinating how many "experts" there are on religion, especially somebody else's religion. Even though my work the last few years has been with interfaith dialogue, I certainly cannot claim to be an expert on any of the religions, even my own Christian faith. But what I do claim is that the more I engage in dialogue with persons of different faiths, the more I learn about them and about my own faith.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of traveling to many countries where Christianity is the minority religion. These experiences have been very enlightening and, at the same time, required me to think more deeply about my beliefs.

The Swedish theologian and New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl became a leader in interfaith matters. He was a professor, then dean of the Harvard Divinity School, and later selected as a bishop in the Church of Sweden. He is well known not only for his books and scholarly articles, but for his three rules of religious understanding:

1. When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adher-

ents of that religion and not its enemies.

2. Don't compare your best to their worst.

3. Leave room for "holy envy."

For Stendahl, "holy envy" meant being willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and wish could, in some way, be reflected in your religious tradition or faith.

As one engages in this spirit with other religious people and traditions and goes deeper into the essence of these beliefs, certain principles and values become apparent. For example, various versions of the "golden rule" are found in most traditions. In the Jewish tradition, it is summarized by the statement of Rabbi Hillel, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the commentary; go and learn."

For Christians, it is taken from the words of Jesus, "Do to others what you want them to do to you. This is the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets." For Islam, it comes from the sayings of Muhammed, "Wish for your brother, what you wish for yourself."

In Hinduism, it is expressed, "One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the rule of dharma."

Most other religious traditions, as well as humanist expressions, contain simi-

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lar teachings. Other understandings at the core of many religions include the role of forgiveness, service and care for the environment.

The specific beliefs and doctrines of the various religions differ in many ways, and it is important to discuss and understand the different truth claims made. But it also is instructive, as well as the path to understanding and peace, to seek these basic values at the core of the various belief systems

and appreciate what it means to be human and how we can pursue our common good.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim Abraham as the father of the faith. It is important to understand why Abraham has been given this status as a friend of God.

According to the account in Genesis, God chose him "so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." (Genesis 18:17)

Now Abraham was called by God more than 500 years before Moses was given the law; more than 2,000 years before Jesus; and more than 2,500 years before Mohammed. At the base of all these religious and ethical systems must be this principle to "do what is right and just."

Let us learn all we can from the adherents of the various faiths, be suspicious of the enemies who claim to be experts and seek ways in which we can help and encourage each person to live up to the highest ideals of one's faith.

In our interaction with all of our fellow humans, let us seek understanding, explore our differences, and live by these principles we find in common which are expressed in the golden rule and in the Abrahamic principle to do what is right and just.

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