

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Truth, tolerance, and humility in interfaith



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"To tolerate is to insult. Tolerance must only be preparatory to open the way to mutual acceptance."

University of Chicago professor Paul Mendes-Flohr, in an article "The Promise and Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue," begins with this quote from Goethe. He discusses a kind of tolerance that is little more than a form of cultural relativism. It is an indifference that does not take the other person seriously.

Mendes-Flohr quotes from a letter written in the 1920s from Jewish philosopher and theologian Franz Rosenzweig to the philosopher Martin Buber: "The Christian ignored the Jew in order to tolerate him, and the Jew ignored the Christian in order to allow himself to be tolerated."

While there are times and places when one's life or livelihood is in jeopardy, and such a minimal understanding of tolerance is better than violence or death, it should not be the goal of interfaith understanding. We can go beyond such indifference to seek acknowledgment and acceptance.

One can also be tolerant to the point of not caring about truth. If I have no commitment to truth, then of course I can show tolerance, but it is at the expense of relativizing your beliefs and practices. It actually is an insult to your faith. If we treat religious belief as

relative and without any truth claims, then the differences are not worth a fight, or for that matter even serious discussion.

Tolerance has many meanings. A recent newspaper column discussed the difference between tolerance and being complicit with what you believe to be wrong. Should I be tolerant of racism, anti-Semitism, or mass shootings? Of course not! In the medical setting we speak of the body's tolerance of certain medicines, such as how much chemotherapy can the body tolerate, or, how much pain can I tolerate. In engineering, we speak of tolerance as how much deviation from a specified standard is acceptable.

ACCEPTING COMMON HUMANITY NOT ENOUGH

In the world of interfaith dialogue, there is also a kind of tolerance that affirms our common humanity, but does not go further in respecting the significant differences. Merely affirming another's humanity can be seen as a privileged position that reflects a "contempt for other faiths." It assumes that we can just relate to one another without recognizing the particularity of our beliefs and practices. Mendes-Flohr contends that Jews, Christians and Muslims, as well as Buddhists and Hindus, would want their humanity to be seen "through the particularity of their community of faith."

Mendes-Flohr asks: "Can an abiding fidelity to the theological positions and values of one's religious community allow one

to acknowledge the cognitive and spiritual integrity of other faith commitments?" While seeking to respect and affirm the humanity of the religiously other, do we at the same time relativize the beliefs and practices of that person?

DIFFERENCES ARE 'CENTRAL ASPECT'

He points out that there can be problems, especially in the Abrahamic faiths that make claims of revealed knowledge, truth claims and propositional reality. He wonders if the monotheistic faiths, which are grounded in historical revelation and include truths claims, are capable of genuine tolerance. He asks, "Are monotheistic faiths constitutionally antagonistic to religious pluralism?"

But Mendes-Flohr does go on to describe another kind of tolerance that resolves "to honor the divergent beliefs and practices of the other, not as incidental but as a central aspect of the religious experience and identity of the other. ... It does not flinch from engaging the other theologically."

Returning to the Goethe quote, Mendes-Flohr insists that tolerance must be in preparation to "mutual acceptance." He concludes with reference to Martin Buber, who was the Jewish editor of an interfaith journal published in the 1920s titled *Die Kreatur* (The Creature), which seeks to encounter the other as a Thou — an "irreducibly unique presence" toward whom one in humility shares "a creatureliness."

It is not just acknowledging a common

humanity but affirming what it means to be a "creature," limited, finite, and NOT the Creator. It is a faith statement that does not imply superiority but humility. Mendes-Flohr calls this a "dialogical tolerance" which respects the integrity of each participant, including his or her beliefs, commitments, values, and practices. This kind of tolerance, born from humility, "may be hailed a theological virtue."

One must not compromise one's own beliefs and commitments in order to respect the other and to engage in dialogue with ideas that oppose one's own belief. Can I take seriously the theological commitments of the others when they clash with my own beliefs? In the interfaith dialogue, it is important to respect the other person as well as the differences in belief. Trying to ignore the differences by merely saying we are just all human is an insult to the importance of deeply held beliefs and practices. Furthermore, it takes away any ability to learn from those who are different.

The key is to maintain one's own faith, while respecting those who may see things differently. It is not relativism, but humility. An affirmation that while I affirm absolute truth, I do not claim that my limited and finite understanding of that truth is fully complete. I become a fellow seeker, learning from others, and approaching truth in a spirit of humility.

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