

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Appreciative knowledge helps build bridges



Douglas Kindschi
Director, Kaufman
Interfaith Institute

"Americans are highly religious but have little content knowledge about religious traditions — their own or those of others."

So wrote Stephen Prothero in his best-selling book "Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — And Doesn't." His recommendation was that more education about religion be taught in our schools from an objective perspective, "leaving it up to students to make judgments about the virtues and vices of any one religion, or of religion in general." Hardly any school boards adopted his suggestion, and in many places the "objectivity" of the teacher would have been a significant issue.

Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, in his book, "Interfaith Leadership," takes issue with "just the basic understanding of other religions." In the interfaith agenda, we are not just dealing with abstract systems or textbook knowledge, he argues, "but actual people interacting in real-world situations." He calls for an "appreciative knowledge" of other traditions, actively seeking out "the beautiful, the admirable, and the life-giving rather than the deficits, the problems, and the ugliness. It is an orientation that does not take its knowledge about other religions primarily from the evening news, recognizing that, by definition, the evening news reports only the bad stuff. ... By being attuned to the inspiring dimensions of other religious traditions, such ugliness is properly contextualized."

Patel's whole approach is to build bridges between people and communities across religious lines. A beautiful example of such occurred last Saturday in Grand Rapids when the At-Tawheed Mosque and Islamic Center sponsored a "Know Your Muslim Neighbor Open House." Hundreds attended and had the opportunity to visit the Prayer Hall, try on a hijab, write their name in Arabic, and ask questions of refugees, teens, and women and men of this community.

A similar example will occur with the Jewish community when Temple Emanuel will sponsor its "Taste of the Passover" next week, with a light meal and a sampling of the traditions of the Passover Seder. It will include holiday music and reading, and is an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about this important Jewish holiday. More information and sign-up is available at our website, interfaithunderstanding.org

Appreciative knowledge also involves the learning of important contributions to our current society and throughout history from the various religious traditions. How many of us know that the architect of the Sears Tower (now the Willis Tower) and the John Hancock Center in Chicago was a Muslim? Fazlur Rahman Khan, the architect known as "the Einstein of structural engineering," was born in Bangladesh, where he received his bachelor's degree in engineering. He immigrated to the United States and pioneered a new structural design that initiated the renaissance in skyscraper construction during the second half of the 20th century.

Khan advised engineers never to lose sight of the bigger picture: "The technical man must not be lost in his own technology.

He must be able to appreciate life, and life is art, drama, music, and most importantly, people."

OVERLOOKED CONTRIBUTIONS

Mathematics also owes much to the preservation and innovation that came from the Muslim community, especially from the House of Wisdom founded in the eighth century in Baghdad. Our current Hindu-Arabic number system was introduced to the West from this center. Ever tried to multiply or do long division using Roman numerals? Many new techniques in solving equations came from the mathematician al-Khwarizmi, whose Latinized name became the term for algorithm. The word "algebra" came from one of the words, "al-jabr," in the title of his famous book on solving equations.

The House of Wisdom also was where many of the Greek classic texts had been translated into Arabic and preserved. The West would likely not have many of the works of Plato, Aristotle and Euclid had it not been for the preservation of these texts by this major contribution of Islamic civilization. Appreciating these contributions also helps us understand how much we owe to other religious traditions.

Patel also discusses the Jewish author Chaim Potok and his novel "The Chosen." It is the story of two Brooklyn orthodox Jewish boys, one whose father is a Hasidic rabbi; the other is more liberal and seeks to put his Jewish faith in conversation with the broader intellectual traditions of the modern world. While the fathers disagreed on many things, the more liberal father tells his son, "There is enough to dislike about Hasidism

without exaggerating its faults." It can be a very different position and we can disagree, but "it ought to be appreciated as well."

One of the challenges of interfaith dialogue is to learn how to disagree and yet have appreciative knowledge about other faith commitments. Interfaith is not a new belief system that says everyone is the same and we all essentially believe the same things. We have important differences, but we can still learn from each other and appreciate the values expressed through these different ways of understanding.

Patel is calling us to build bridges of cooperation across differences, and one of the important building blocks is this appreciative knowledge. Networks of engagement help create relationships among those who orient around religion differently. In this way, we build understanding that can lead to new friendships.

He describes hearing Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, speak. Mandela appreciated the role that many faith traditions contributed to his freedom. As he pointed in the direction of Robben Island he said: "I would still be there, where I spent a quarter century of my life, if it were not for the Muslims and the Christians, the Hindus and the Jews, the African traditionalists and the secular humanists, coming together to defeat apartheid."

Yes, we are different and have different faith traditions, but we can differ and even disagree while at the same time appreciating others through our knowledge and through our friendships.

interfaith@gvsu.edu