



Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, left, stands with Pope Francis, center, and Imam Khalid Latif, executive director of the Islamic Center and chaplain to students at New York University, in September 2015 at a multireligious gathering during a visit to the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York. *Getty Images*

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Quest-driven faith embraces validity of others' paths



**Doug Kindschi**  
Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

"It is by way of devotional prayer, study and mitzvot that I am provided with the tools to address the spiritual yearnings lodged in my soul."

So wrote Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove in his essay "A Quest-Driven Faith." Mitzvot is the Jewish term for the commandments, and so he is saying that prayer, study and following the commandments are the tools he uses in his faith quest.

Cosgrove is the chief rabbi at Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City and a highly respected rabbi in the Conservative tradition. He appeared with Pope Francis and Imam Khalid Latif, from New York University, at the special interfaith service for peace at the 9/11 Memorial in 2015. A brief video from that event is at [bit.ly/CosgroveAtMemorial](http://bit.ly/CosgroveAtMemorial).

Cosgrove makes the distinction between those who feel they possess the truth from those who are seeking the truth while recognizing the profoundly limited ability of humans to fully understand an infinite God. His stance is humility.

He refers to the Christian theologian Karl Barth, who many consider to be the greatest theologian of the 20th century. Barth's 14-volume "Church Dogmatics," in addition to a dozen books, certainly puts him in a special place for both the output and influence of his work. When Barth was asked about his prolific writings, he commented, "The angels will laugh when they read my theology." Cosgrove uses this as an example of how "a complete understanding of God is forever beyond human comprehension."

He sees the person of faith as one who "has made the willed choice to seek to understand and stand in relation to the mystery of our existence." Cosgrove compares it to love, where it does not require one to have total knowledge of the other person for that relationship to be significant, "even all-encompassing." He writes that his starting point for his faith as a Jew "does not

adolescent with his father who had served as president of two Reformed Church colleges. After being honorably discharged from military service in World War I, his father went to India, where he taught at a Reformed Church mission high school. There, he met and became friends with a devout Hindu.

Don Lubbers told it, "During one of our father-son trips together, when I was seeking his view on the truth of our family's religious traditions, he related the story about his talk and his Hindu friend. He concluded that he and his friend were born to walk different paths toward truth and both should be considered valid. I watched my father live his life committed to where he came from, but without claiming exclusivity. His story about his acceptance of his Hindu friend set the course for me."

In last week's Insight, we discussed Eboo Patel's dissatisfaction with the image of a "melting pot." He instead proposed the "potluck dinner," where each of us brings to the table our distinctive identity and commitments. In a similar way, Rabbi Cosgrove describes an alternate image of the "symphony, in which the distinctive sounds of each instrument are not lost if the right harmonies are achieved." In his book "Go Forth," Cosgrove shares a Rosh Hashanah sermon on "Why I Am a Jew." While recognizing that his reasons might not be enough to satisfy another person, he includes the following:

- "I am a Jew because Judaism is a faith that provides me with the tools ... to make every day sacred."
- "I am a Jew because it gives me ... the language to fill my life and the life of those around me with meaning, inquiry and the presence of God."
- "I am a Jew because Judaism sees no conflict between being a Jew and being a member of a shared humanity."

### "I am a Jew because Judaism gives me the tools to give voice to my faith in God ... to answer the existential questions lurking in the depth of my soul."

*Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove*

seek to define God, but rather encompasses a lifetime of approximations and affirmations, collectively reflecting a desire to draw close to my creator."

When he discusses the "mitzvot" or following the commandments, he does not see it as "a list of do's and don'ts," but as "opportunities to bind myself to God's will." The quest is always in dialogue with traditional texts, scripture and the Jewish literature, in "an effort to respond to the questions of the age." He recognizes that others come from different traditions and have made different choices, and he respects the integrity of those choices.

He writes, "Faced with the awe of creation, the wonders of existence, and the mysteries lurking in my soul, I consciously choose to find the vocabulary, rituals and spiritual demeanor that serve as the spiritual scaffolding to my existence. I opt to actively ponder the inponderable."

For Cosgrove, this choice does not rule out others who by tradition or by choice have taken a different route. He writes, "The great strength of a quest-driven faith is that it permits me to affirm my own beliefs, even as they develop, all the while respecting the integrity of another person's path."

I am reminded of a recent talk by Don Lubbers, former Grand Valley State University president. He told of his own upbringing in the Reformed Church of America, and a discussion as a questioning

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Cosgrove affirms his Jewish identity without disparaging the religious identities of others. It is the key to seeing our community not as a melting pot, but as a symphony or a potluck dinner. It is seeing with humility that our faith is on a particular path and that God is beyond our limited understanding.

The topic of "Religious Identity" is also the theme of the triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue coming to West Michigan on Nov. 14 and 15. Eboo Patel and Rabbi Cosgrove, along with Christian seminary professor Jennifer Howe Peace, will be our speakers. Join us as we examine the role of religious identity and whether it is bringing us together or dividing us into separate camps.

*interfaith@gvsu.edu*

## IF YOU GO

## Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue

**When:** Nov. 14 and 15

**More information and free registration:**  
[InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org)