

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Understanding needed to talk about conversion



Douglas Kindschi Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

"So God created human-kind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27.

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures tell the story of creation with this affirmation of humans created in God's image. But just what does it mean to be created in God's image? Scholars would agree that it doesn't mean that God has a human image. God doesn't look like an old man with long white beard. Most interpretations would involve the characteristics humans have that are not apparent in other creatures. Features like reason, creativity, free will, responsibility, morality or even language, are characteristics of humans that reflect aspects of God's nature. Being created in God's image is also understood as the basis of human dignity. It gives rise to certain inalienable rights.

In last week's Insight, I wrote about one of our founders, Richard Kaufman, and the doctoral dissertation that he was getting ready to defend prior to his death. His position was that human dignity is the meta-ethic for Reform Judaism and should be the basis for a more open approach to conversion to Judaism.

Among the various religions, the topic of conversion is approached in many different ways. In Islam, the word "Muslim" means one who submits to the will of God, regardless of his/her race, nationality or ethnic background. Hence, any person who is ready to submit to the will of God can become a Muslim by affirming the Testimony of Faith, or Shahada, by saying, "I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God." Of course, after making such a declaration, the convert is expected to follow the other teachings and practices of the faith.

For Judaism, conversion has a mixed history as well as some current controversy.

The Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Scriptures tells the story of this Moabite woman whose Israelite husband dies. Rather than returning to her own people, she tells her mother-in-law, Naomi, "Wherever you go I will go, and wherever you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16) Ruth goes on to marry another Israelite, Boaz, and becomes the great-grandmother of King David. The book is highly respected and is read each year during the Jewish holiday of Shavuot. It is the story of a convert who plays an important role in Jewish history.

Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, chief rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City and one of our speakers at the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue last November, refers to this as "the anthem for all such righteous converts. Just as the Jewish people entered the covenant with God at Mount Sinai, so too Ruth joined our people, and through today, all men and women seeking to bind their destiny to the destiny of the Jewish people turn to the Shavuot hero Ruth as the paradigm for their journey."

Cosgrove also calls for a more open approach to accepting converts without insisting that they complete a difficult process before even being considered for acceptance.

As he put it, "When I join a gym, they don't tell me, 'Get in shape and then join'; they say, 'Join and then we will get you in shape.'"

"This attitude should be our approach to would-be Jews. ... The Conservative Movement should be the



Rabbi Donniel Hartman will speak at a May 16 symposium about conversion at Grand Valley State University's DeVos Center.



Richard Mouw is one of the speakers scheduled for a May 16 symposium on conversion at the DeVos Center.

IF YOU GO

What: "Conversion: Jewish and Christian Perspectives," a symposium in honor of the late Richard Kaufman

When: 7-9 p.m. May 16

Where: Loosmore Auditorium, GVSU DeVos Center, 401 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

Registration: Free

Info: InterfaithUnderstanding.org

movement of conversion. That should be our mission."

Rabbi Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, will be one of our speakers at the May 16 symposium on the topic, "Conversion: Jewish and Christian Perspectives." He also has urged a more open approach to conversion and will be sharing with us his ideas at the symposium.

The Christian approach to conversion has been more direct. Many would insist that conversion is required for salvation. One of the early Jewish-Christian Dialogues in Muskegon featured as the main speakers Rabbi David Hartman, founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute, and Krister Stendahl, dean of the Harvard Divinity School. At the end of a long day, Hartman asked Stendahl, "Do I have to be wrong, in order for you to be right?" Stendahl resisted answering, claiming that it had been a long day and he was tired. Hartman insisted, "No, you can answer that question." Stendahl finally conceded, saying, "No, you do not have to be wrong for me to be right."

This is a critical question as we address the increasing diversity in our own communities. Sharing what one believes is different from judging what another person believes. I'm reminded of the admonition of St. Francis that we should, "Preach always! If necessary, use words." Another Francis, the current pope, recently visited the Muslim country of Morocco, where Christians and Jews are welcomed. Pope Francis said that the church does not grow by proselytizing, but by example.

At the upcoming symposium, Richard Mouw, president emeritus of Fuller Theological Seminary and previous faculty member at Calvin College, will address a Christian perspective on conversion. In his book, "Adventures in Evangelical Civility," he urges empathy and a willingness to learn as we engage those from other faith communities. As he writes, "God is God, and we are not, which means that we fall far short of omniscience. ... This means that what might at first glance appear to be our radical disagreement with a certain point of view might, upon humble reflection, require a confession of sin." It requires a "spirit of theological humility."

The topic of conversion can be controversial in our community, and we seek to understand and accept each other better as we explore the issue in the upcoming symposium.

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