



This stained-glass window inside Christ Chapel at Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids references the binding of Isaac. *MLive.com files*

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Seeing beyond the view at my particular window



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"Don't think we can confine God into our categories. God is bigger than religion."

These were the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in an interview with him conducted by Krista Tippett on her radio program "On Being." She was interested in exploring with Sacks how we bring our individual particularities and identities into discussions with those who are different in background, culture and identity. She suggests that we honor "the essential mystery and dignity of the other ... not as an adjunct to faithfulness, but as an article of it." She asks Sacks how he can retain the truth claims of Judaism while honoring the others who believe differently.

Sacks was for more than 20 years the chief rabbi in the United Kingdom and well known for his books, including "The Dignity of Difference" and "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence." He responds by pointing to the passage in the Torah in which Moses is confronted by the burning bush and asks God, "Who are you?" The three-Hebrew-word response Sacks translates as, "I will be who or how or where I will be"; or as Sacks writes, "Don't think you can predict me. I am a God who is going to surprise you."

He goes on to explain, "One of the ways God surprises us is by letting a Jew or a Christian discover the trace of God's presence in a Buddhist monk, or a Sikh tradition of hospitality, or the graciousness of Hindu life. Don't think we can confine God into our categories. God is bigger than religion."

In 1965, Pope Paul VI promulgated the final document from the Second Vatican Council, titled "Nostra aetate," Latin for "in our time." It was a declaration of the Church's relationship with non-Christian religions and began by reflecting on what all of humanity has in common while seeking unity and love among all peoples and nations. Furthermore, the document declares that it "reveres the work of God in all the major faith traditions." It continues by recognizing Hinduism's affirmation of the divine mystery and seeking freedom from human suffering. Buddhism is noted for its recognition of the "insufficiency of this changeable world." While clearly affirming its own teachings regarding the centrality of Christ, it goes on to note that these religions "nevertheless often reflect a ray of Truth which enlightens all."

The declaration continues by expressing "esteem" for the Muslims, as "they adore the one God ... merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth." Muslims also honor the Virgin Mary, await the Day of Judgment and "value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting."

The Council goes on to acknowledge that the Church's faith begins with the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. Its revelation begins with the "Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can (the Church) forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles."

More recently, in one of his daily medita-

tions, Franciscan Richard Rohr reminds us "unity is not the same as uniformity. Unity, in fact, is the reconciliation of differences, and those differences must first be maintained — and then overcome by the power of love."

Rohr quotes Brian McLaren, a writer and former pastor recognized by Time magazine as one of the 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America. McLaren writes of a "Christian identity that is both strong and kind. By strong I mean vigorous, vital, durable, motivating, faithful, attractive, and defining. ... By kind I mean something far more robust than mere tolerance, political correctness, or coexistence: I mean benevolent, hospitable, accepting, interested, and loving, so that the stronger our Christian faith, the more goodwill we will feel and show toward those of other faiths, seeking to understand and appreciate their religion from their point of view."

I recall a sermon by former West Michigan pastor Richard Rhem, who was reflecting on his visit to Chartres Cathedral a few miles outside of Paris. He noted that these great cathedrals, built centuries before the printing press, told the faith stories through their stained glass windows. As one enters the nave and looks to the west, you see the creation story, and then the stories of the patriarchs, exodus and the prophets. Going further, one observes the birth of Jesus and the stories of his life and teaching.

Rhem imagines what it would be like if one group of people only looked at the windows in the west wall of the nave and another who huddled in the transept or in the choir. What if they didn't move out of that location and only knew the light coming from that particular story? "The only part of the story they knew was Creation or Christmas or Easter, or whatever it may be. Would they not think, 'That's it! That's the story.' But it wouldn't be the story at all. It was a chapter of the story. It was a facet of the story."

Rhem then imagines various windows from the different faith traditions. "What if all of these respective groups were gathered before their windows where the story was told, their story? And what would be the common thing that would bind them together? Being unconscious of one another and without knowledge of anyone else's story, what would be the common thing? Well, it would be the light that streams through all the windows, that illuminates all the stories."

Could we mistake our various "windows" as reality itself and not be aware of the light that makes that view possible? Is the whole truth of God's revelation contained in what my finite mind and understanding can perceive?

In my own Christian tradition, I recall the final verses of the famous "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13: "For now we see through a glass dimly, but then I will see face to face." Let us not mistake our particular limited window as the full reality of what God is doing in our world. Let us be open to how God might be working far beyond what I can see through my tiny window. I can affirm my faith, but at the same time be humble about my limited view.

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