

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Finding cooperation and respect in the path to peace



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Last week, I was part of a Faith and Justice Symposium at my alma mater, Houghton College, in upstate New York. Having graduated from this Christian college nearly 58 years ago, it was a special privilege to return to the campus. Much of the campus was the same: the chapel where we were required to attend every day, the administrative building where the library was also housed. Comparable in size to what I remember (1,000 students more or less), it was most impressive to see the new buildings: a new, much larger library, a modern science building, an arts center and a beautiful new campus center.

Even more impressive was the changed attitude and openness that I found inspiring. I must admit that in my day it seemed very restrictive and controlling — no dancing or going to movies, and dress was monitored, especially for women. Religious and political opinions were quite narrow. I remember a special chapel service being called in 1962 to pray that a Roman Catholic (John F. Kennedy) would not be elected president of the U.S.

Now these decades later, chapel still is required (but only three days a week), racial diversity is apparent and faculty as well as students entertain open and inquisitive attitudes about the larger world. I even saw a poster announcing a “Social Dancing” event to be held. To attend a symposium focused on interfaith was special for me, since this has been a major part of my life this past decade. A few years ago, I had even been invited to speak at one of the required chapels about our work with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute.

This year’s symposium began with a dialogue between Eboo Patel, Muslim founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, and Shirley Hoogstra, president of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities and former administrator for 15 years at Calvin University. The acceptance and respect that each speaker had for the life and faith of the other was clear. They did not minimize their own faith commitments and insights while at the same time respecting and learning from the other.

Hoogstra began with biblical references appropriate to our topic, beginning with Jesus’ answer to the question from the lawyer asking what the greatest commandment was. Jesus responded by quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

She also referenced the prophet Micah, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

In all of our interfaith encounters and discussion, Hoogstra emphasized this attitude of humility. She pointed to Pope Francis who, in welcoming European immigrants and refugees, took the stance of humility by washing the feet of these immigrants, Muslim as well as Christian. She emphasized the importance of both holding firmly one’s faith understanding while at the same time supporting a “civic pluralism” that supports the freedom for all to worship and believe from their own convictions.

Patel began by noting that, throughout history, what held countries together was a common faith and common ethnic heritage. The United States, however, from the beginning sought to welcome all. This was expressed by our Founding Fathers. George Washington welcomed the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island, and encouraged their full participation in the benefits of citizenship. Benjamin Franklin contributed funds to a variety of religious organizations in Philadelphia and built a special hall that would invite preachers and speakers from all traditions. Thomas Jefferson was the first president to host an iftar at the White House, the meal held each day after sunset to mark the end of that day’s fasting during Ramadan.

But Patel also lamented the pervasive prejudice and discrimination in our current society. As the father of two young boys, he told of his 9-year-old son coming home from school after a Martin Luther King Jr. Day remembrance and telling his father that he didn’t like MLK Day. Puzzled by this response, he asked his son why. The boy’s response was that “everybody looks at me.” As the only child of color in his classroom, he felt this attitude directed to him as someone who was different. Hoogstra responded and expressed her belief by saying, “I know God better when I know more about all the people created in God’s image.”

Patel concluded by noting that the Qur’an says God could have made one people but instead made us into races and tribes and that we should know each other. He also told of the Christians from Najran, a city about 450 miles away from Medina, who came to talk with the Prophet Muhammad and discuss their differences. When it came time for the Christians to pray, Muhammad invited them to pray in the mosque that he had built there. In their continued discussions, they did not agree on theology, but they respected



Eboo Patel, Muslim founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, and Shirley Hoogstra, president of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities and former administrator at Calvin University, speak during the Faith and Justice Symposium at Houghton College in upstate New York. *Submitted by Doug Kindschi*

each other and left with an agreement from Muhammad to protect their lives and property, as well as the freedom to practice their Christian faith.

As Patel told this story, I was reminded of an early interfaith dinner meeting that took place here in Grand Rapids. It was held at the Jewish Temple Emanuel. At one point during the dinner, the Muslim men came to me and said it was time for their prayers and wondered where they might go. Rabbi Schadick told me they were welcome to pray in the worship area of the temple. When I took them to that location, they then asked me which direction was east. So here was a Christian telling the Muslim men in a Jewish temple which direction to pray. I guess that is interfaith cooperation and respect.

So, from a Christian college in upstate New York to our Jewish temple here in Grand Rapids, we are seeing interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Let this be our path to peace!

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Shirley Hoogstra, president of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities and former administrator at Calvin University