

On What Can We Agree?

A Message by James R. Newby

Compassion is the wellspring of religion...

-Karen Armstrong

We are living in a dangerous time. This is not startling news to most of us. Many issues and various culture clashes threaten to undo the fabric of tolerant diversity that holds our world together. Such issues and clashes are no more prevalent than within our various religious communities and cultures.

A few years ago, the former President of Earlham College and Middle-East expert, Landrum Bolling, was asked what concerned him most about our world. His response: “The rise of fundamentalism within all of the major faith traditions.”

Fundamentalism and extremism have always, and will always be a part of all religious faith traditions, whether it is a fundamentalism that keeps a strangle hold on traditions that can no longer be defended reasonably, or an extremism that does not respect anyone else’s tradition or theological position. Intolerance will always be with us. The BEST of our religious traditions, however, and the best that is within each one of us, will seek to discover those areas within all faith traditions that unite and sustain us, and provide a basis of understanding toward those who are different from us.

Karen Armstrong, the former nun and now prolific writer, once spoke at the church I served in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. She spoke about her book, **The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions**. Of the many important things she said, none was more important than this: “Compassion is the wellspring of religion...” She made the important observation that *The Golden Rule* was first expressed by Confucius some 500 years before Jesus, and is the touchstone of all of the major faith traditions. As I reflected on Armstrong’s observation, I began to consider the following questions: “What else unites and sustains us within our various faith traditions?” “What are those elements, values, teachings and truths that we can respect and honor in within the Christian tradition, as well as within the traditions of Judaism and Islam, that may help to lessen the danger of our time?” In short, “Without diluting the witness and understanding of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and recognizing that ours is a diverse world, *on what can we agree?*”

At the heart of all three faith traditions, there is a hunger for a divine/human connection. Within Christianity, Judaism and Islam there are mystical traditions that greatly enhance our different faiths and our love of and search for God. The writings of such mystics as St. Francis within the Roman Catholic tradition and Thomas Kelly and James Naylor within our own Quaker tradition exemplify this mystical element within the Christian tradition. Abraham Heschel within the

Jewish tradition defines “spiritual” as “the ecstatic force that stirs all of our goals. When we perceive it, it is as if our mind were gliding for a while with an eternal current.” He writes about a religious person being, “one who holds God and humans in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.” Finally, the poet, Rumi within the Sufi Muslim tradition, writes, “Look at spirit how it fuses with earth giving it new life...the wolf and lamb, the lion and the deer far away yet together...Looking at the unity of this spring and winter manifested in the equinox...” All of these writers from their various traditions are evidence of a hunger for and experience with the divine, which can serve to unite and sustain us.

Justice is also at the core of all of our faith traditions. Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* magazine has noted that archaeologists, in the peeling away of layers in their digs in Israel, have been able to discern those periods when the Prophets of Israel were most vocal and active by recognizing when there is a great discrepancy between the very rich and the very poor. Jesus made issues of justice the heart of his teaching, proclaiming that our neglect of those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison, is a rejection of him. Muhammad’s message was first greeted with hostility by those in charge when he preached an uncompromising monotheism, an end to licentiousness and a challenge to the unjust social order.

Indeed, one of the five pillars of Islam addresses the disparity of wealth in the world, and admonishes those who have much to help lift the burden of those less fortunate. At core, all of our faith traditions are concerned with the issue of justice, especially for the poor.

A community that is built on the values of truth and integrity is also at the core of all of our faith traditions. Ethical conduct within the cultures we reside is a concern of all religions. To cheat a brother or sister in the faith, or to build a life upon a web of lies, is unacceptable in the cultures of Christians, Jews and Muslims. The following words spoken by Muhammad during his “farewell pilgrimage” to Mecca and shortly before his death, sound as if they could have been written by the Apostle Paul in one of his Letters to the young Christian Churches: “O men! Listen to my words and take them to heart! Know ye that every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim, and that you are now one brotherhood...” These words echo Paul’s emphasis upon belonging to “one another” in Christian community, and are certainly a part of the traditional emphasis within the covenantal community of Israel, especially what is expressed in Leviticus 19:18 “...love your neighbor as yourself.”

When asked at the end of her presentation at Wayzata Community Church in Minnesota, what we can do to help bring together today’s Christians, Muslims and Jews, Karen Armstrong said, “We should not talk about what we believe. We must

go beyond ‘tolerance’ and ‘dialogue’ and work together. We must let our actions show what we believe, what we hold in common.” *We all seek a divine/human connection...we all want justice for all...and we all want to live in a community built upon the values of truth and integrity.*

We do, indeed, live in a dangerous world, and it becomes ever more dangerous as extremists and fundamentalists spew forth their own brand of divisiveness. While living in Minnesota, I belonged to a small group that drafted a statement in a practical effort to focus on those things that unite us. It was hoped that such a statement would find support in churches, synagogues and mosques, as we seek for ways that we can work together. We called it, “The Minnesota Mission,” and with this I close. In simplicity and brevity it reads: **We come together in our interdependent world, of many races, cultures and faith traditions, to learn from one another in peace. Respecting our differences, we seek a better life helping others as we would like to be helped.**