

## **On What Can We Agree?**

A Message by James R. Newby

Matthew 7:12

Today is the day for the Cincinnati Festival of Faiths, sponsored by the interfaith organization, *EquaSion*. As one of the Honorary Co-Chairs of this event (I am hoping to get a plaque!), I will need to leave worship immediately following this message, and make my way to the Cintas Center on the campus of Xavier University.

Carole Barnhart and Vicki Culler from our Meeting have already left to prepare the Meeting's display table. This is a special day as our community celebrates the diversity of our faith traditions, and a time when we accentuate what we all have in common. For those of us who are Quakers, a day like this is *very* important. From our beginning, Quakers have sought to unite in peace the multiple cultures and faith traditions that make up our world.

Landrum Bolling , a roving Quaker ambassador for peace, Lilly Endowment Director and the former President of Earlham College in Indiana, was once asked what concerned him most about the

**current situation of our world. His response: "The rise of fundamentalism within all of the major faith traditions."**

**Fundamentalism and extremism have and will always be a part of religious traditions, whether it is a fundamentalism that keeps a strangle hold on traditions that can no longer be reasonably defended, or an extremism that does not respect any other tradition or theological position. *Intolerance* will always be with us. The best of our religious traditions, however, the best within each of us, and the major reason for the Festival of Faiths, will always be seeking to discover those areas within all major faiths that unite and sustain us, and which provide a basis to understand those who are different.**

**While I was the minister of faith and learning at Wayzata Community Church in Minnesota, I invited Karen Armstrong, the former nun and now prolific author, to speak about her book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*. Of the many important points that she made, none seemed more important than this: "Compassion is the wellspring of religion." She**

observed that some five-hundred years before Jesus, Confucius expressed the *Golden Rule*. It remains the touchstone of all the major faith traditions. As I reflected on Armstrong's observation, I began to consider these questions: "Besides the *Golden Rule*, what else unites and sustains our different faith traditions?" "What are those elements, values, teachings and truths that we can respect and honor within the Christian tradition, as well as within the traditions of Islam and Judaism?" "How can these common values lessen the dangerous faith and culture clashes of our time?" In brief, without diluting the witness and understanding in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and recognizing that ours is a diverse world, on what can we agree?

At the heart of all three of the major faith traditions is *a spiritual hunger for connection with the Living God*. Mystical elements within these traditions greatly enhance our faiths and our love of and search for the Living God. For example, the writings of St. Francis within the Roman Catholic tradition, who many have considered the

**finest example we have of a *nature mystic*. Ilia Delio writes, "Francis has been described as a *nature mystic*, one who finds God in the vast and beautiful fields of nature. Everything spoke to Francis of the infinite love of God. Trees, worms, lonely flowers by the side of the road, all were saints gazing up into the face of God. In this way, creation became the place to find God, and in finding God, he realized his intimate relation to all creation." Jame Nayler and Thomas Kelly within our own Quaker tradition, exemplify this mystical element. On his death bed, James Nayler said, "There is a Spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil, or to avenge any wrong, but delights to endure all things, in hope to enjoy its own in the end. Its hope is to outlive all wrath and contention, and to weary out all exaltation and cruelty, or whatever is of a nature contrary to itself." And writing from an inward spiritual place, Kelly wrote, "Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time torn-lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding**

**destiny, calling us home unto Itself. Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body, and soul, utterly and completely to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life."**

**Abraham Heschel from 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 awhile with an eternal current." He writes about a religious person as, "one who holds God and humans in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffer harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair."**

**The poet Rumi, representing the Muslim tradition has declared, "Look at spirit how it fuses with earth giving it new life...the wolf and lamb, the lion and 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 mystic hunger for and experience with the Living God which can serve to unite and sustain us.**

**Second, *justice is also at the core of all faith traditions.* The prophets of the Hebrew Scripture, especially Amos, were all concerned about justice. Jesus made issues of justice the heart of his teaching, proclaiming that neglect of those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and in prison, is a rejection of him. Muhammad's message was first greeted with hostility by those in the culture where he lived, when he preached an uncompromising monotheism, an end to licentiousness and a challenge to the unjust social order. 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 major faith traditions are concerned with justice, especially for the poor.**

**Third, *a community that is built on the values of truth and integrity is also at the core of the major faith traditions.* Ethical conduct within the cultures where we reside concerns us all. To cheat a brother or sister, or to build a life upon a web of lies, is unacceptable within the traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The words of**

**Muhammad spoke during his "farewell pilgrimage" to Mecca and shortly before his death, sound as if they had been written by the Apostle Paul in one of his Letters to the young Christian Churches: "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 as expressed in Leviticus 19:18, "love your neighbor as yourself."**

**Three common and major emphases of our major faith traditions...*A spiritual hunger for a connection with the Living God...the pursuit of justice for all, and communities that are built on the values of truth and integrity.***

**While living in Minnesota, I belonged to a small group that drafted a statement in a concrete practical effort to focus on those things that unite all people. We hoped that our statement would find**

**support in churches, synagogues and mosques, as we sought ways to work together. In simplicity and brevity, the statement summarizes what I believe to be *the hope* underlying the purpose of the Festival of Faiths: "*We come together in our interdependent world of many races, cultures and faith traditions to learn from one another in peace, and to celebrate our diversity. Respecting our differences, we seek a better life helping others, and engaging one another in a spirit of Hope and Peace.*"**