

Thanksgiving Interfaith talk 11/23/2005

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It is an honor to be here with you tonight. It feels especially satisfying to me to be speaking at an interfaith gathering, since I have spent most of my academic career working in the field of comparative religious studies. And this is a subject matter I know not only academically but also from personal experience, since my own family involves at least one representative each of Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism.

But I must confess that when I was invited to speak tonight, I felt a little apprehensive about the time allotted, since my firmware is set for lectures of almost an hour. When I told my wife I was allowed only 10-12 minutes tonight, she said, "Write a haiku." As I'm sure most of you know, a haiku is a very short Japanese poem that compresses a great deal of meaning into just three short lines. I thought that was a wonderful suggestion, but when I began saying "Yes, write a haiku. That's a great idea," my wife began to get nervous. She's my very best friend and loves me dearly, but 42 years together has taught her a realistic appreciation of my limits.

Nevertheless, I *have* tried to *emulate* the art of the haiku by beginning with three pithy statements that I think pack even more meaning into their brief space when heard together than any of them does separately.

1. There is a Rabbinic saying to the effect that when a person appears before the throne of the Holy One, blessed be His name, the first question he or she will be asked is, "Did you look deeply into things?"
2. I once heard Paul Tillich say that "an atheist is a person who believes that being has no depth."

3. John Zizioulas, a Greek Orthodox theologian, could almost have been thinking of Tillich's words when he said in turn that "the substratum of existence is not being but love."

I think we might all agree that the true task of religion for each of the traditions represented here tonight is to help rediscover the concreteness of true life by uncovering the love that constitutes its dimension of depth.

So there is my haiku, and I still have a few minutes left for some commentary. I could not possibly do justice, even with more time than I have, to the full implications of the meaning compressed in those three brief statements. But since this is a gathering of several different faiths, let me begin by considering what makes thinking about this depth dimension challenging for us when we stand in different, not always mutually friendly, faith traditions.

Let us begin with the question of "What divides us?"

One source of division would be the fact that we use different names, images, and concepts to try to talk about the depth dimension of life and its mysterious source. But I don't think this fact is in itself necessarily divisive. In every religious tradition, spiritual explorers reach for adequate metaphors and images for what lies in the dimension of mystery, and there is no reason why additional ones from neighboring or even distant traditions should not be found helpful by a person stretching to find words for what lies beyond words.

Another source of division is the way we sometimes tend to forget that we are reaching for something that can never be fully and finally captured in a net of words. We would like to be able to claim full adequacy and to pin down the mystery with certainty, and so we easily slip into the idea that the language of our own tradition is exhaustive and exclusive.

This is where I think the *real* problem lies. And if we look around us within our own traditions, we can see that this is a source of division not only *between* different faith traditions but also *within* them. Those of us who know the Christian traditions of North America and Western Europe are, of course, familiar with the centuries-old divisions among the various Protestant groups and between them and Roman Catholics. Before those groupings split off from one another, there was an earlier, and I think much deeper, split between Western and Eastern Christianity. And anyone seriously involved in the life of almost any of the mainstream Christian denominations today knows that there are divisions *within* those denominations that can seem even deeper to those suffering them than those *between* the denominations.

I could go on to talk at length about these and about similar divisions in other religions too, but that's a painful topic that I have no wish to dwell on.

Let us turn, then, to the more hopeful topic of what unites us. This I think is very real and even visible, especially here on this occasion — since those of us who have gathered in this house of worship tonight are among those in the various religions and denominations represented who believe in looking beyond division.

So, what is it that unites us? To be brief, there are at least two things:

- The movement of transcendence inherent in our religious traditions and in each of us.
- The possibility of recognizing mystery as mystery, and therefore of acknowledging both the inadequacy of the metaphors we use for it and the potential helpfulness of multiple metaphors.

If I had more time, the professor in me would love to discuss examples, from several religions, of symbols that point into mystery and that can helpfully complement one another, to the point that each can take on richer meaning when read in the light of each other. But we don't have more time, so I will only mention one example that may suggest others in your own minds.

In the case of the three principal religions represented here tonight, we might consider, for example, the images used in each to express what it means to be *a people called by God*. In the Jewish tradition there is the symbol “Israel.” In Christianity, there is “the body of Christ.” In Islam, there is the Ummah, the community of the faithful who hear the word of God and heed it. Each of these symbols refers not only to the formation of a group but also to a notion of true personhood, and each implies that such personhood is not purely individual, but corporate. First there was Abraham, the patriarch in whom all three traditions recognize their ancestral root. Then there was his son. And then there was that son’s son, known as Israel. But from that point on in the Biblical story, the entire people bearing Israel’s name came to know themselves as one corporate person called by God into sonship. God said to Moses, “Tell Pharaoh I want my son to go free, I want my son Israel to go and worship me in the desert.” Christians and Muslims, even with different names for it, also understand themselves as called by the one source of all life into a relation of filiality. And that relation has as its hallmark and its deepest inner reality, love — our grateful love for the loving giver of life, and our love for our brothers and sisters not only in Israel, Christ, or the Ummah, but also our love for those in all the world whom our God has made and for whose sake He calls us not only to share love and preserve faith among ourselves but also to be a light to all peoples through the example of our love and loyalty. To live as true persons is something we cannot do alone; we can only do it together.

So let us join each other in giving thanks tonight and tomorrow, with whatever words we know how to use, to the source of all life and light and to the spirit that that one source breathes into each of us and into every human being to enable us to recognize His light in the symbols of each of our traditions, and to feel the breath of His love in each other.