

WHAT GOOD IS RELIGION? A CONVERSATION WITH THE WORLD
JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; MARK 9:30-37
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Texas pastor John Hagee, founder of *Christians United for Israel*, was interviewed by Terry Gross last week on “Fresh Air.” UB graduate Gross, who is a Jew and lesbian, was a model of gracious, patient, professional restraint.

Christians United for Israel is a self-described Christian Zionist movement, lobbying Congress for policies supporting the State of Israel because, they believe, a secure Israel is the biblical requirement for the return of Jesus in our time.

“Do you believe the Rapture could occur at any moment Pastor Hagee?” Gross asked. “Oh, I do, I do, I do, I do.” Hagee responded in an eerily sweet voice. “Do you think the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel this summer are precursors to Jesus’ return?” “Without question,” Hagee said, in his best baritone, then added, as if he were talking about next year’s promised bigger and better state fair, “We’re going to see a global military conflagration in the Middle East unlike anything witnessed in history.”

I wish I could say Pastor Hagee and *Christians United for Israel* are isolated footnotes to the religious upheavals of our time. But I can’t. His organization represents some of the largest mega-churches in the nation and flooded the halls of Congress in April of this year with 3,800 zealots from around the country.

It goes without saying but perhaps needs to be noted that Hagee and his cohorts stand for the violent domination of Christianity over other religions and nations, as well as the removal of the separation of church and state in our constitution.

I don’t usually cross paths with the Pastor Hagees of the world. Intellectually, I know people with such attitudes are out there. But it doesn’t hurt to actually encounter one once in a while as a wake up call.

I want to talk with you today about Christianity’s conversation with the world. My mind has rambled since hearing Pastor Hagee about the sharp disagreements I have with him on this subject. Does the interfaith conversation take place at the end of a barrel or is it a conversation between equals in pursuit of common ground and mutual understanding? Are Christians called to be partners or opponents with other religions?

While my own preference is partnership I worry about how the followers of other religions view the church. I’d like to propose that it’s not enough to just disagree with Pastor Hagee.

Why does any of this matter any way? There is little doubt, especially since 9-11, of the significant role religion plays as a shaper of world events. Unfortunately, it is often used to rally groups against groups to advance political agendas. But what I want to explore today is how religion can also be a force for peace instead of violence, inclusion instead of exclusion, equity instead of dominance.

It has been quite a week for interfaith awareness in Western New York. Last Saturday, Canisius College, Temple Beth Zion and Peter and Joan Andrews sponsored “The Disputation”—a medieval debate, turned into a dramatic presentation, between a rabbi and priest. The context is the church’s aim to convert Jews to Christianity.

The play was timely and sobering—just what the Andrews who live part-time in Washington, DC, where they first saw the play, hoped it would be for the Buffalo audience. At dinner before the production, I sat next to the artistic director of the Washington theatre that presented “The Disputation” last spring. He said their location a few blocks from the White House added poignancy to the performance.

The Canisius version was inspiring. The renowned Theo Bikel, a personal friend of the Andrews, had the lead role. The event was given in memory of the partnership between TBZ’s Rabbi Martin Goldberg and Canisius’ former president Fr. James Demske. The aura of their friendship enveloped the room during the question and answer time afterward.

We are talking today about the conversation between Christianity and the world religions. Early this week the Dalai Lama visited UB. Several of you attended one or more of the three events at which he appeared. I heard him Tuesday in UB’s new football stadium where 30,000 people listened in pin-drop silence for 90 minutes while he talked.

No small irony was the location of the Dalai Lama’s meditation on peace and compassion: the University’s gladiatorial gridiron.

Someone wondered out loud if Jesus might have conveyed a similar combination of gentleness and strength in his words and laughter. It was a marvelous insight and helped me to consider the face to face impact Jesus must have had on people. The Dalai Lama’s deep serenity, self-possessed without being self-absorbed clarity and playful spontaneity were, I’ll bet, similar to Jesus.

So why do we have to worry about groups like *Christians United for Israel* with everything else we are called to do at church and home?

The challenge is that our rapidly changing world teeters on the brink of self-destruction; leaves millions to fend for themselves like the helpless residents of Darfur; and goes right on melting polar ice-caps. I’d like us to consider an informed awareness today that guides our steps as world citizens and believers.

In a recent scholarly article advocating interfaith awareness and action Tiffany Puett said, “Religions...persuade adherents to look beyond themselves as individuals and consider their wider connectedness. They are communal in nature. They assert a shared humanity and compel critical examination of our obligations to others beyond our own communities.”^[i] Can we disagree about some things? Of course. Can we respect and live with our disagreements? That’s our task.

How do we address problems and conflicts without resorting to violence and domination? The Dalai Lama says in the quotation on your bulletin the purpose of religion is individual awareness and personal growth. Religion is a path for personal wholeness. Look at yourself, deal with your brokenness, then turn to your neighbor.

The letter of James says the same thing today. “Those conflicts and disputes among you come from the cravings that are at war within you. Let your works be done in gentleness and born of wisdom...peaceable first, then gentle, willing to yield, and full of mercy.”

When it comes to the preservation of life, respect for neighbor and personal wholeness the world’s religions have more in common than we might think.

My understanding is that the job of a Jew is to study Torah; the job of a Muslim is to discern and act on the will of God; the job of a Hindu is to carry out one’s sacred duty day to day; the job of a Buddhist is to discover our connection with the universe; and the job a Christian is to follow Jesus.

These are each sacred paths with different stories and rituals. But they come from the same Source and lead toward the same goal. Living the way of Jesus resonates with the practice of Buddha. A Jew who studies Torah does what the Hindu who carries out sacred duty in daily living also does. I am not saying all religions are the same. I am saying there is a compatibility that should not be surprising.

Yet, like the disciples, we get to arguing not about what our faith calls us to do so much as what our ego or politics call us to do. We distract ourselves with arguments over vocabulary and dogma. These arguments have the illusion of being religious.

But when Jesus took a child in his arms and said whoever welcomes one child in my name welcomes me, he revealed the holy interconnectedness of life, a chain of relationships:

welcome the child, you welcome him, welcome him you welcome God. A fellowship of hospitality is forged between the believer, the child, Jesus and God. A hospitality that excludes no one.

You see, Jesus gives his followers a choice. When they get to arguing about the greatest, he places in their midst one who is the least—a child. When they look for personal reward he offers personal wholeness.

Could it be that we live in a time when practicing our faith demands such sharp choices? Could our preference to fight over our differences, not only among the religions but within them, rather than to collaborate for clear cut commitment and action expose an unwillingness to heed God’s call?

I say it’s not enough to disagree with Pastor Hagee. What would happen if the church would begin to forge the kind of hospitality Jesus talked about whenever and wherever it gathered? What if our notion of greatness could be conceived of in Jesus’ terms?

The commitment we made to Mari Madeline Russell dedicating our teachers, the commitment Jesus calls us to make to all the children begs the question, calls us to action. Amen.

^[i] Tiffany Puett, “Transforming our world: critical pedagogy for interfaith education,” Cross Currents. Issue theme: cultivating religion—the politics, art, and ethics of theology, Summer 2005,