

5772 RH II – Interfaith As a Jewish Challenge

Comedian Emo Phillips tells the following joke. It is listed as joke number 23 in (the June 1999 comedy issue of) a Gentlemen's Quarterly magazine article: THE 100 FUNNIEST JOKES OF ALL TIME as determined by a poll of comedians, writers and joke historians.

“Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!"

He said, "Nobody loves me."

I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

He said, "A Christian."

I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me, too! What franchise?"

He said, "Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over."

Within the religious community of the United States, it is obviously not always so easy to understand or accept each other's points of view. Clearly, that is true even if both parties in the discussion are Christian.

I think the first time I fully realized this was in the late 1970s during an interfaith program in Easton that involved Jewish and Christian clergy. The main speaker was the very prestigious Krister Stendahl, who was the Dean of Harvard Divinity School from 1968 to 1979.

Dr. Stendahl spent the morning explaining why Judaism was important to Christians, given that Jesus was Jewish, but that Jews did not need to have a defined position on Jesus. After breaking for lunch, there was a question and answer period. The very first question came from a minister who wanted to know, "what do the Jews think about Jesus"? Dr. Stendahl looked the man in the eye and answered: "exactly what Christians think about Mohammed!" I have told this true story in the past, but I was reminded about it recently while participating in a 9-11 tenth anniversary event.

This was my first of four interfaith observances of the weekend and was held at the Penn State Campus in Center Valley. The program included very appropriate Muslim and Hindu prayers and I offered a 9-11 reading on several of the differences in our lives between September tenth and eleventh, 2001. I was followed by a Protestant minister from "up the line in Schuylkill County." He, as I, was listed as delivering an "inspirational reading." Instead, he chose to offer a prayer on behalf of the victims, rescuers and their families. That, of course, was fine, but his language was

very Christian for the setting. I thought he saved the day by saying that we are all God's children and all loved by God. That would have been a perfect conclusion, but he was not able to stop there. Instead, this minister encouraged all of us to accept Jesus before it was too late to capture our place in heaven. I obviously could not applaud that prayer and frankly could not believe my ears that such an idea had been expressed in a public, interfaith setting. A minister, admittedly an older gentleman and retired, still did not understand that this was neither the time, place nor audience for this type of a prayer.

But with each year that passes, I wonder more and more what the future of interfaith interaction will look and sound like. I have pointed out in the past that for some people, interfaith means various Protestant denominations talking with each other. For some, interfaith means Protestants and Catholics talking with each other. For some, interfaith means Christians and Jews talking with each other. For some, it means Jews and Muslims or Christians and Muslims talking with each other. For some, it means Christians, Jews and Muslims talking with each other. For some it means representatives of Eastern and Western religions talking with each other. And for some, and I fear this includes many Jews, especially younger Jews, interfaith means nothing at all. And should dialoging matter to us, especially as we sit here on one of the most sacred days in the Jewish year? I would like to think that if anything is a matter of concern to the Jewish community, then it needs to be addressed when the community gathers and frankly, those are rare occasions.

The Torah reading this morning, the Akedah, is actually a pointed example that we Jews have been intermeshed with other traditions for close to two millennia. The story of the Akedah seems straight forward in

Genesis. God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. At the last moment, God saves Isaac and he is replaced on the altar with a ram. But that is the version that we stream to the Jewish community. Twenty years ago, Dr. Burt Visotzky, one of my rabbinical school friends and currently a professor of Midrash at the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text. Chapter five is “Binding Isaac.” Rabbi Visotzky makes reference to two “Syriac homilies on the binding of Isaac.” “Syriac is a dialect of [Middle Aramaic](#) that ... first appeared around the 1st century CE, ... [and] became a major literary language throughout the [Middle East](#) from the 4th to the 8th centuries.” In one of the homilies, Sarah says to Isaac after he is ‘saved’: “Henceforth, my son,... people will call you ‘offering which died and was resurrected.’” “When the anonymous Syriac homilist has Sarah call Isaac the ‘offering which died and was resurrected,’ it subtly opens the door to Christian theology with its promise of a dying and yet resurrected God. ...” The New Testament affirms this connection in “The Epistle to the Hebrews, (chapter 11, verses 17 – 19): ‘By faith, Abraham being tested offered up Isaac,... of whom it was spoken, ‘In Isaac shall your offering be called.’ By reckoning that God was able to raise [corpses] from the dead, he got him back – in parable.’ Rabbi Vistozky translated this passage rather literally to show how the device of typology – reading the “Old” Testament in light of the “New,” was already functioning in Hebrews. The reference in the passage to ‘only begotten son’ refers more to Jesus than to Isaac....” The story of the akedah is obviously important to more than just Jews! And as Dr. Visotzky notes later in the chapter, “Nor are the Christians alone in reading the story of Genesis 22 through such particularistic glasses. The prophet Muhammad received, among his revelations from the angel Gabriel, a specific teaching

about the binding of Abraham's son. The tale is recounted in the Koran, chapter 37. ... By now it will come as no surprise to readers that Muslim commentators for more than a millennium have presumed the bound son to be Ishmael, eponymous ancestor of the Islamic people. Just as in the case of Christianity, the Muslim assumption seems to be that identification with the bound son authenticates that religious tradition as the inheritor of Abraham.”

I asked Dr. Peter Pettit, the director of the Institute for Jewish – Christian Understanding, to share some of his thinking on the benefits of dialoguing. His response has an intellectual dimension. Dr. Pettit wrote in part: “In the contemporary, “post-modern” world, none of us can claim to have ...[a] viewpoint that allows us to know everything, or the truth about everything. We are, in that sense, all on a journey. We undertake it without a definite destination, without a sure map, without an accurate codebook for the blaze-marks we find along the way. So we seek a guide based on the experience of those around us, and we move forward with that guide, or group of guides, with more or less comfort and assurance that it/they will help us on our journey.

Our religious traditions are such guides, and each one claims to know a – or the – worthwhile destination and the way to gain it.

In such a situation, paying attention to what other guides are doing can be instructive, beneficial, and enlightening. So it's an instrumental good in our spiritual quest.

It's also a social good, in that understanding other religions and communities enables us to find common ground, identify common values, and work together more effectively for the common good....

And with both Jews and Christians living for the past 2,000 years as the people of God, albeit estranged from one another, it behooves me to

know what God is doing and how God is understood and worshipped and related to in that other part of the people from the one in which I live. We in the church got this so wrong for so long, it's time to rewrite our theologies nearly from the ground up, since our anti-Jewish posture and reflex lies so close to the root of all we have done. And this time, to do it more right, we are well-advised to have some from that other part of the people of God – the Jews – involved in the project with us as partners, on-lookers, reality-checkers, alert ears – as that ‘other’ without whom we cannot understand ourselves in relationship to God.”

While Dr. Pettit wrote in theological/intellectual terms, I want to comment on the last part of the passage which I quoted, because I think it has enormous practical implications. The Jewish people have friends in the Christian community. Dr. Pettit, who knows a great deal about Judaism, is one of them. There are other Christian clergy and Christian lay people, who know much less about Judaism, who are also our friends. But it would be an enormous mistake to think that all Christians are our friends or that they are sensitive to our feelings, insecurities and needs. We also have some interlocutors in the Muslim community, but there are many fewer and the issue of understanding each other's feelings insecurities and needs is even more complex. If Jesus complicates matters between Jews and Christians, then Israel, Jerusalem and settlements certainly affect our relationships with Muslims.

There are over one billion Christians in this world. There are well over one billion Muslims in this world. There are about 15 million Jews in this world. And yet, we know we can't hide. Doesn't it seem to be in our best self interest to try to understand Christianity and Islam and to do our very best to explain Judaism and work towards one of Dr. Pettit's lofty goals

for interfaith dialog: “understanding other religions and communities enables us to find common ground, identify common values, and work together more effectively for the common good.”?

Make no mistake – this is not the 1950s in any way in the Jewish community. Twice this year I have had congregants speak to me in sadness and somewhat in shock about hurtful, insensitive comments made to them. In each case, a Christian whom they knew and with whom they enjoyed a good relationship made an ignorant comment to them. In one, it was the well known, “Jewing down.” In another, it was about a “Jew boy.” Perhaps neither person recognized what they were saying and may not have meant it to be hurtful – but the Jew who heard it, heard it, and was hurt. Are you all aware that in several area high schools there have been incidents of similar insensitivity, at the least, and real anti-Semitism at the worst? Pennies being thrown at Jewish teens or left at their computer keyboards, swastikas drawn on backpacks or anywhere are painful and must be confronted. And we need Christians and Muslims to understand why these words and actions are so painful to us and what they have led to over the centuries.

Remaining isolated in closed communities as some Jews do, or looking to disappear in the general community as many unaffiliated Jews do, will not help us. We need to engage others – so that we will not be viewed as just “others” to them. Who will rise to this challenge among the many challenges we face in the Jewish community? One or a few professional Jews will not succeed without the help of the larger Jewish community. Ironically, Ishmael and Jesus both started out in the Jewish communities of their time. Perhaps, if we could have found a way of dialoging with them, we would have helped ourselves as well as the world. As with so many challenges, I do not think it is too late to make progress and a new year

provides new opportunities to succeed. Let us take advantage of these opportunities.

AMEN