

NEEDLES' EYES & OPEN TABLES

The question I asked that touched most directly on the appreciation of religious difference had four parts:

Do you feel comfortable with people who do not belong to your religious tradition?

Do you feel anyone from another religious tradition is able to understand your religious experience?

Do you feel you can understand theirs?

Do you feel they can have as much access to the Sacred through their system of belief (formal or informal) as you do through yours?

Many people in the South have not been exposed, certainly not on a daily basis, to people of different faiths. That is changing everywhere. In my neighborhood outside Atlanta, many of the high school students wear hijab with their jeans. On my way to the local branch of the library five blocks away, I pass a mosque with a predominantly Somali congregation and a Vietnamese Buddhist temple. I run into monks in saffron robes chattering in some unidentified language as they borrow videos at the downtown Decatur library. My interviews in Greenville, South Carolina included interviews with young Muslim women who had been born there and Hindu professors at the local technical college, who had been born in India. In Chattanooga, the Hindus I met were an engineer with TVA and an American-born, Carolina-raised, Berkeley-educated high-tech educational consultant; the founder of the local Muslim school had been raised there as a Seventh Day Adventist.

Comfort

The degree of personal contact you have with people of different cultures, languages, and faiths, especially early in life, is powerfully formative of your view of the-way-life-is-supposed-to-be. Churches in the South are highly segregated still, so even when people share the same faith tradition, perhaps even the same denomination, but not the same race, they may never

have worshiped together. If they felt free to say it, they might include these experiences of cross-racial worship as being as profound an encounter with difference, perhaps even profounder, than visiting a Hindu temple in India or Lilburn, Georgia.

Social unfamiliarity enfolds into other forms of discomfort. This is especially true if people have strong purity instincts, so they easily feel their faith has been defiled. I think of the horror of the young Roman Catholic priest, Father Ken, when his favorite parishioner, Ken Muschelewicz, returned from his meetings with local Muslims to whom Father Ken had sent him to evangelize saying, "I *do* believe what they do." All the priest's months of making positive associations between the prayer discipline of Muslims and Benedictine discipline suddenly exploded: "I can see you have been poisoned."

Evangelism—and missionary work—add an interesting dimension to this question of unfamiliarity. As a frequent visitor in Latin America, I was fascinated by the fervent faith of the people I met and the interesting syncretism of different religious traditions, how intuitively and elegantly people had woven their beliefs together. I found it sometimes painful to see American mission groups with microphones and loudspeakers putting on mime shows for a bemused audience in the central plaza. It was never clear to me where familiarity came into this. Did the missionaries on these quick visits know anything about the faith life and faith practices of the people they were performing for? What kind of commonality did they assume? What kind of difference did they insist on to give their evangelism purpose in this setting? Was getting to know someone with the sole purpose of trying to convert them getting to know them at all?

Mutual Understanding

Many people who immediately said they felt they could understand the spiritual and religious experiences of people of other faiths did not necessarily think that others could understand their own. I never knew quite what to make of this. What would happen to their faith experience if they *did* feel, for example, that a conservative Christian could hold it in imagination?

I've come to believe that more than feeling we can hold another's experience faithfully in imagination, it is more important, more challenging, and ultimately more reconciling to come to imagine that someone can hold our *own* experience in this way. Someone vastly different from us. Feeling that there is a mutuality of imagination changes our idealizing or demonizing of

another faith tradition, indeed, this capacity to imagine that *others* can hold *us* in respectful, caring imagination might have the greatest effect on our sense of assurance about their faith and our own.

Equal Access

The question of equal access to the Sacred is particularly difficult for Christians because, as Diana Eck explores in her book *Encountering God*, Christian exclusivity claims are one of the most formidable obstacles to a true appreciation of religious difference. Muslims see Jews, Christians, and Muslims as all descended from Abraham and all as "people of the book." Buddhism often describes itself as a philosophy rather than a religion, so people can talk about being Jewish or Roman Catholic Buddhists. Hinduism honors Jesus as an avatar, one of many instances of the divine made human or the human made divine.

The more literal a faith one has, the less likely one is able to identify, or honor, similar religious experiences described in different words, within different frames of belief. "Is their god, who they call Allah, the same as ours?" is an honest, heartfelt question, one with very serious implications if you believe that your God is a jealous God who punishes idolatry harshly, even if it is unwitting.

If you truly believe the only way to salvation is by believing in the historical Jesus Christ as the only Son of God and that nothing, absolutely nothing but these exact words, *I accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior*, will guarantee your salvation and that of everyone else in the world, the request—or demand—that you relativize your faith, see it as *equally* powerful, valuable, dear—is terrifying, dangerous, corrupting, enraging.

On the other hand, in the United States this belief lives in partnership with another belief, which also claims to be grounded in tradition, that all human beings are created equal because we are all equal before God. How these values play out in someone's faith life depends on many things. If as Christians we see these exclusivity claims as just or if, on the other hand, we see them as powerful but baffling and at odds with our deepest human sympathies will create two very different faith contexts—even if both groups subscribe to the same belief that there is only one Way to the Holy.

Just as I think it is fair to ask someone to feel what this relativist request can feel like to a Christian with a strongly held exclusivist faith, I think it is fair to ask those with exclusivist claims to feel what it means to another to be

the recipient of such rejection and to find in themselves a place of equivalent pain to provide a point of empathic entry. Exclusivity claims are, of course, not exclusively Christian.

People who hear such exclusivity claims made against them in the name of all that is good and powerful need to understand that these claims are experienced as beyond human will, or human modification and that the relief of salvation in these cases usually travels hand and hand with a horror of damnation. People on the outside of this exclusivity claim need to understand its power—but they also need to affirm, in the face of it, the sweet reality of their own experience of the Sacred and its equal value and authenticity.

In both cases I think the most powerful questions to ask are these: *How* did you come to believe this? Can you imagine how someone or another faith might feel when you say this? In other words, to offer to walk as best you can in someone else's shoes and to invite them to do the same with you.

MILES BRETT

"I believe," Miles Brett said at the end of his interview, "and my wife used to hate this and my girlfriend hates it now—that every time a Jew marries outside the faith, they are continuing the work Hitler started. My early experiences with Holocaust survivors taught me that the major job for Jews is to repair these losses."

When he said this, seated on the comfortable couch in his comfortable house, intriguingly decorated with quilts and folk art chairs, it was as if the whole interview, my empathic trajectory, reversed itself. Even now, rereading the interview some years later, having forgotten this part of it, I am shocked. Both by the baldness of the comment and that, yet again, I didn't see it coming.

Indeed, my most vivid memory of the interview is of his description of a woman, a family friend, a Southern Baptist, who enjoyed dating Jewish men but, "if pushed, would say we were all going to hell." This has always stayed in my mind as a formidably callous and cruel attitude—to socialize with people, treat them as intimates, enjoy their culture and achievements, and quietly and uncomplicatedly sentence them in all their goodness to the direst depths of your own belief system. *Why on earth wouldn't you question the belief system?*

What makes Miles' comment so surprising is that he is a successful,