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Seeking religious harmony, the urgent call of our time

Bill Tammeus | Jun. 16, 2010 A small c catholic

In speeches and columns over many years I have made the point that interfaith understanding is vital if there's to be any hope for world peace.

And America ? a stunning amalgam [1] of ethnic and religious traditions ? can be a model for the world in this regard.

In fact, if the call of the 20th century for Americans was to work toward racial harmony, the call of the 21st century is to seek religious harmony in our increasingly pluralistic culture.

That's why I was delighted recently to learn of the efforts toward this goal undertaken by Merrimack College [2] , a Catholic school in the Augustinian tradition.

Just last month, this North Andover, Mass., school's Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations [3] announced the award of its Goldziher Prize [4] to Prof. Mark Cohen [5] of Princeton University. The prize is named for a 19th century Jewish scholar of Islam, Ignác Goldziher [6], a Hungarian who respected Islam and who legitimated Islamic studies in European universities.

Cohen, a rabbi, teaches Jewish Civilization in the Near East and is author of *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* [7], which focuses on advantages Jews in that era had when they were governed by Muslims and when, as Cohen told me, Muslims and Jews got along better than they usually do today.

What I found most hopeful about this award is the very existence of Merrimack's Jewish-Christian-Muslim center. I hadn't known about it before. A press release describing the Goldziher award said the center has expanded its mission from mostly Jewish-Christian relations studies to include Islam. Good. As Cohen told me, "It's extraordinarily important that Americans learn about Islam, understand Islam and know and respect Muslims. That's the primary need.

"My experience is that up until recently dialogue was dialogue. It was Jews and Christians. Now Muslims have been brought into the picture ..." So, he says, we are starting to have "trialogue."

Although the record of all of Christianity is quite spotty when it comes to understanding and appreciating other religious traditions, Catholicism has made some helpful steps toward doing exactly that in recent decades. Evidence includes the Vatican II creation in 1964 of the "Secretariat for Non-Christians," later renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue [8].

Add to that the pioneering 1965 document, "Nostra Aetate [9]," in which the church ? after centuries of anti-Judaism ? finally said Jews should not be held collectively responsible for the death of Jesus, and there has been cause for hope.

This hope finds expression in the work of, among many others, Fr. Dennis D. McManus, consultant to the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

[10]. I've heard McManus several times and am always encouraged by both his scholarly approach to interfaith conversation and his warm embrace of people of other faiths, even as he stands solidly in the Catholic tradition.

And that's precisely the lesson I hope Merrimack's center and others promoting inter-religious understanding are teaching: Learning about other faiths does not require us to abandon our own. Indeed, my own experience of learning more about Judaism as I researched my new book, *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* [11], has made me a better Presbyterian even as I think it has made my rabbi co-author a more committed Jew.

We need not shrink from exposure to religious traditions beyond our own (and in that I include atheism) for fear that we'll compromise our way of being. Rather, the idea of interfaith dialogue is simply to know and to be known. And it helps to approach that task with the Benedictine virtue of humility.

Without such an attitude, we may begin interfaith encounters with a conversion agenda. That almost certainly will sow distrust and end the conversation. And why would we Christians do that when we know that the job of conversion is not ours but, rather, the Holy Spirit's?

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