

International Symposium on “Religious Identity and Renewal. Jewish, Christian and Muslim Explorations

In our relationships with the Holy One we, Jews, Christians and Muslims, realize that we do not fully comprehend the depth of divine mystery, although we must try. All three traditions affirm that human beings are created in the image of or according to the will of God. The inherent dignity of every human being is independent of religious belief and social status. As a consequence, religious practice should strive to enhance compassion and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Theologies and religious identities are shaped by different contexts, experiences and intellectual and spiritual trajectories. Human beings are complex; while no one can be reduced to their religious identity alone, for many people the sense of belonging to a religious community is an essential part of everyday life. Religious communities are internally diverse and often intra-religious differences are more complicated to deal with than inter-religious ones. In all three traditions, renewal and reform movements will continue to challenge their own communities at the levels of teaching and practice today. As religious identities become more fluid, we recognize new alliances forming across traditional religious borders. For example, interreligious cooperation exists in such broad areas as social justice, peace and gender initiatives, and a commitment to environmental concerns.

The last decades have seen migration on an unprecedented scale resulting in ethnically and religiously plural communities on all continents. This result has led to new challenges and opportunities for individuals and communities such as intermarriage and multiple religious belonging. In the face of these changes, some communities are becoming more inward looking while others are becoming more outward looking. Communities are seeking renewal in many different ways. These include: reinterpreting difficult texts, the healing of memories and overcoming past divisions. Understanding more fully the historicity of the texts and of the divisions helps us to think anew about the constructive meaning of the texts in today's world. Each of our religious communities draws on rich interpretative expertise (midrash, tafsir, linguistic analysis, hermeneutics), and in reflecting on the interpretative challenges together we mutually benefit from this expertise.

Theological education can be an important space where religious scholars discern the meaning of the Holy Scriptures and the traditions in ways that are true to the living relationship with the Creator. Jewish, Christian and Muslim identities are interrelated and their theologies have a rich history of responsiveness to one another. Today we see people of different generations in all of our faith communities asking radical questions about God in the face of tremendous human suffering. We realize that we cannot consider the future of our own faith community in isolation from others; our communities are closely related and the future of life in dignity is a shared concern.

Therefore, we call on the people and leaders in our communities to

- Create spaces for encounter in local communities, including both religious and non-religious people, so that all can meet to listen and talk to one another, to share stories and to ask questions so that stereotypes and prejudices will be challenged through authentic encounter with one another

- Deepen theological reflection on how we deal with diversity and difference, both in intra- and interreligious relations. Affirming human dignity and the need for more radical compassion in response to vulnerability and suffering becomes a criterion for interpreting the texts of, and constitutive events in, our faith communities today
- Provide theological education that intentionally relates to the presence of people from other religious communities. This helps to forge deeper relations among religious leaders, discern contemporary and future challenges together, acknowledge and respect our differences and together to deepen our understanding of God in the midst of today's challenges
- Seek an end to violence and aggression. In the midst of sectarian hostilities, we require leadership that opposes the use of violence in the name of religion and instead strengthens values of dignity, compassion and solidarity.
- Strengthen and expand interreligious collaboration to alleviate poverty, work for justice and peace and overcome discrimination at local, regional and global levels
- Engage in interreligious relations in a spirit of fun and with a sense of humor.

Thirty Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars from many different countries and traditions met at Seattle University, August 10—14, 2014, together to discuss religious identity and renewal in the twenty-first century. The international symposium was co-sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation and the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University.

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