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“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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What the best religion? With all the recent debate over the construction of a Muslim cultural center a couple blocks from *ground zero* in New York City, questions about religion and inter-religious dialogue are front page news. Part of the challenge for America is how to be a richly diverse nation while at the same time honoring and respecting our individual life stories?

In reflecting on religious diversity—one of the strengths of our great nation—I’m reminded of a conversation between Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, and the Dalai Lama, the highly esteemed, exiled leader of Tibetan Buddhism. During an interlude at a conference, just to see what sort of response he might get, Boff asked the Dalai Lama, *what is the best religion?*

Clearly a *loaded* question, Boff later commented how he thought the Dalai Lama would say Tibetan Buddhism or one of the oriental religions much older than Christianity. However, the Dalai Lama paused, smiled, looked Boff in the eye and replied:

The best religion is the one that gets us closest to God. It’s the one that makes us a better person.

Becoming fully engaged, now, Leonardo Boff asked, *What is it that makes me better?*

Without blinking, the Dalai Lama responded, *Whatever makes you more compassionate, more sensible, more detached, more loving, more humanitarian, more responsible and more ethical. The religion that will do that for you is the best religion.*

Boff was silent for a moment, marveling at the Dalai Lama’s wise and irrefutable response. The Dalai Lama went on:

I’m not interested, my friend, in your religion or if you are religious. What’s important to me is your behavior in front of peers, family, work, the community and the world. Remember, the universe is the echo of our actions.

If I act with goodness, I will receive goodness. If I act with evil, I will get evil. What our grandparents told us is the pure truth. You will always have what you desire for others. Being happy is not a matter of destiny; it is a matter of options.

Finally, he concluded, saying,

Take care of your thoughts because they become words. Take care of your words because they become actions. Take care of your actions because they become habits.

Take care of your habits because they will form your character. Take care of your character because it will form your destiny. And your destiny will be your life; there is no religion higher than the truth.

Where religion takes us. What the religions of the world reveal to us is that they all have their good points, their sublime glimpses of the divine. In most cases, what religion we are has to do with context—where we were born and what religious story we were raised up in.

For the Dalai Lama, the name of the religion is not important. What is important is the place our religion takes us and the glimpse it gives us of the human heart. When our religion nudges us along the pathway of justice and communal responsibility, it is the best religion. When it prompts in us a response of compassion and generosity of spirit for the poor, the downcast and the infirmed, it is the best religion. When it leads us to the shores of God's tender mercies and forgiveness, it is the best religion.

What is important is not the religion we adhere to or what temple of worship we attend. What is important are the decisions we make everyday and the largeness of our vision for the world we live in.

Whatever the final outcome of the controversy at *ground zero*, our challenge, as Americans and as members of the human family, is to strengthen and deepen our common bonds of understanding. It is to lift up the best and the highest in our shared traditions so the best that rises up in us defines our character and our actions.