

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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The many pathways to God. As a person of faith, I have always believed there are many pathways to God. And just because someone is *not* in my group and doesn't *think like* I do or *talk like* I do doesn't mean their pathway to God is any lesser than mine. It's simply different.

Always, one of the dangers in the Christian Church, or in any faith tradition, is to be too exclusive in anything we do; too exclusive in membership, in who can take Communion or be baptized or married or buried or whatever it is.

All the religions of the world have their pathway to God. And these pathways bear much in common. Clearly, there are distinctions, which shouldn't be trivialized; but there's also much in common.

In *Islam*, for example, the cornerstone belief is in the *oneness* of God—a monotheistic belief which is shared with Christianity and Judaism. Also, Islam has its own version of the 10 Commandments and much that overlaps with the teachings of the Bible.

Buddhism emphasizes a sense of detachment from the desires of the world which Christians find reflected in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

This detachment is itself a process, or a path of enlightenment that leads to the exalted state of *nirvana*, somewhat comparable to what Christians call salvation. Buddhism, along with Judaism and Christianity, also emphasizes equality and teaches the Golden Rule as one of its core tenets.

Hinduism, the oldest of the world's major religions, also believes in the *oneness* of truth, and teaches that different sages call it by different names. A vibrant thread of tolerance runs throughout Hindu teachings. The practice of *yoga* and the notion of *karma* are two of Hinduism's contributions to our modern vernacular.

A common goal of all the world's religions is *liberation*—to be free from the clutches of the world; free from too much desire, from sin and from ignorance. When we are truly free, we are able to move towards greater *oneness* with God and with each other.

Faith is personal. If we think about it (faith being personal), how can it be otherwise? For faith to *be faith*, people have to be free—free to sort things out, as the Spirit moves in our lives; and free, as well, to discern the teachings of our sacred writings. Such faith discernment is an on-going *adventure of the Spirit* (or process) which has no end.

In all of this unfolding, sometimes, it's useful to ask ourselves, *Why am I who I am* as a person of faith? For me, that would translate into, *Why am I Christian*, as opposed to something else?

My answer to this question is very simple and straight forward. I am Christian because this is the faith that God has given me. I was born into a Christian family in a largely Christian context. My parents and ancestors before me were Christian as well.

However, just because I happened to be born in Aurora, Illinois, into a Christian family in a Christian social/historical context, doesn't mean that *my* way or *our* way is the only way.

I could have been born in Sri Lanka (south of India) and been Buddhist; or in India and been Hindu; or in Indonesia (the largest Muslim country) and been Muslim. Or, I could have been born Jewish, as were Jesus and the Apostle Paul.

Towards a more interfaith world. At their best (their most loving and accepting), all faiths nudge us toward a larger and more compassionate view of life. They invite us and challenge us (this is certainly the case with Christianity) to be *big* people.

Big people aren't petty; they're not exclusive. They don't have to always *be right* and they don't have to have other people *agree with them* all the time to be okay. *Big* people value diversity and realize that diversity makes us better, bigger people. As people of the 21st century, we *must* appreciate the value of diversity along side the larger goal of unity.

Part of what's happening in our country in recent years is that, for many people in the heart land and in the Bible belt, the world has changed. And they are anxious and uneasy about the change. They haven't had time, yet, to evolve with the times.

To meet the challenges of the 21st century, we have to embrace this sort of change with a *big* spirit—a spirit of tolerance and openness. People don't have to be like us to be Americans or Christians or adherents of any other faith. Again, there are many pathways to God; and many pathways, as well, to the future of peace and shalom we all desire.