

Guidelines for Interreligious Understanding

THOMAS KEATING

When world religious leaders convened to discuss their spiritual practices, they found a surprising number of similarities.

In 1984, I invited a group of spiritual teachers from a variety of the world religions—Buddhist, Tibetan Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic—to gather at St. Benedict's Monastery, Snowmass, Colorado, to meditate together in silence and to share our personal spiritual journeys, especially those elements in our respective traditions that have proved most helpful to us along the way.

We kept no record and published no papers. As our trust and friendship grew, we felt moved to investigate various points that we seemed to agree on. The original points of agreement were worked over during the course of subsequent meetings as we continued to meet, for a week or so each year. Our most recent list consists of the following eight points:

1. The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names: Brahman, Allah, Absolute, God, Great Spirit.
2. Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
3. Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization.
4. Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality. Faith in this sense precedes every belief system.
5. The potential for human wholeness—or in other frames of reference,

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enlightenment, salvation, transformation, blessedness, nirvana—is present in every human person.

We became more honest in stating frankly what we believed and why, without at the same time making any effort to convince others of our own position.

6. Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service of others.
7. As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
8. Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality.

At the Annual Conference of May, 1986, we came up with additional points of agreement of a practical nature:

- A. Some examples of disciplined practice, common to us all:
 1. Practice of compassion
 2. Service to others
 3. Practicing moral precepts and virtues
 4. Training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice
 5. Attention to diet and exercise
 6. Fasting and abstinence
 7. The use of music and chanting and sacred symbols
 8. Practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness and living in the present moment)
 9. Pilgrimage
 10. Study of scriptural texts and scriptures

And in some traditions:

11. Relationship with a qualified teacher
12. Repetition of sacred words (mantra, japa)
13. Observing periods of silence and solitude
14. Movement and dance
15. Formative community

- B. It is essential to extend our formal practice of awareness into all the aspects of our life.
- C. Humility, gratitude, and a sense of humor are indispensable in the spiritual life.
- D. Prayer is communion with Ultimate Reality, whether it is regarded as personal, impersonal, or beyond them both.

We were surprised and delighted to find so many points of similarity and convergence in our respective paths. Like most people of our time, we originally expected that we would find practically nothing in common. In the years that followed we spontaneously and somewhat hesitatingly began to take a closer look at certain points of disagreement until these became our main focus of attention. We found that discussing our points of disagreement increased the bonding of the group even more than discovering our points of agreement. We became more honest in stating frankly what we believed and why, without at the same time making any effort to convince others of our own position. We simply presented our understanding as a gift to the group.

Michelle Boyd



Building bridges through dialogue.