

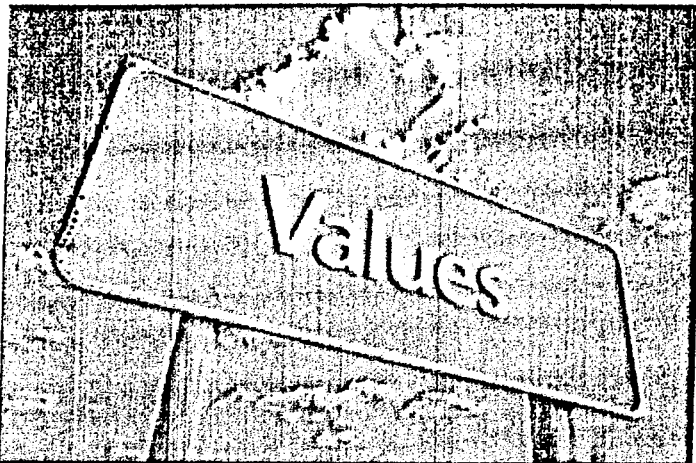
Reclaiming the Sacred: Five Uniting Religious Principles

Tuesday, July 15, 2014 at 09:00AM

Maha Elgenaidi

WHAT WE SHARE

It's disheartening to persons of faith that something as beautiful as religion, which brings so much peace to its adherents, can equally be used to fuel hatred and conflict. But such is the case. One need only think of Sunnis and Shias in Iraq, of Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar, and of the rise of anti-Muslim parties in Europe, even in such supposed bastions of liberalism as Denmark. In this time of Ramadan, when 1.6 billion Muslims enter a special sacred season of discipline and reflection, all people of faith should confront this contradiction.



While we may never be able to stop violence in the name of religion, we can prevent it at home and in our lives by remembering and instilling in each other basic ethical principles that are held by all religious traditions. In a world that has been blinded by lust for power, material gain, and prestige, people of faith need to stand together to defend and promote what all religious traditions hold as the highest human – and divine – values. Dialogue and encounter within and between our different faith communities must build on these common values and communicate them to a world in desperate need of reestablishing its moral center.

We propose five basic principles to undergird this task. We are not putting forth this list as definitive; obviously there can be different enumerations of such basic principles. We hope, however, that this can serve as a starting point for reflection and action on the crucial principles that our faith traditions share.

These principles are:

Respect for life

Fundamental to all religious sensibilities is respect for life, especially sentient life, and above all human life. Whether life is seen as the creation of a good God (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), as a manifestation or expression of the Divine (Hinduism), or as a vehicle that can ultimately attain enlightenment and Buddhahood (Buddhism), all religions see life as sacred.

This respect for life runs counter to a world that sees human life as expendable for reasons of

political power, economic gain, or even, supposedly, of religion. It calls for the condemnation not only of overt violence but also of threats to human life arising from poverty and oppression, including lack of access to health care, adequate food and water, and sanitary living conditions. It also calls for care and protection of the environment and all its natural resources.

Respect for dignity

All religions recognize human beings as fundamentally equal and hold that human life has meaning and purpose, in that humans are entrusted with the welfare not only of other humans but also of all creation – a responsibility they bear as God’s noble deputies (in theistic religion) or as the highest form of sentient life (in non-theistic traditions). Respect for human dignity is, therefore, another fundamental principle of all religions.

This principle rules out discrimination against people on the basis of race, ethnicity, ancestry, socio-economic status, gender, or disability. Seen positively, the principle of equal dignity calls for respect for all human beings, even those with whom we most profoundly disagree or whose cultures or lifestyles seem most alien to us. Recognition of the equal worth of all is, therefore, essential to building a world community of wholeness and peace in this age of globalization.

Respect for freedom of religion and conscience

All religions assert that an authentic relationship with God or the sacred must be freely chosen; it is the result of a personal decision that can be neither forced nor inhibited from without. This clearly implies that, as the Qur’an states explicitly, “there is no compulsion in religion.” Despite violations of this principle in history, the majority of leaders and adherents of all major religions today support the freedom to choose a religion, or to choose not to follow any religion, recognizing such freedom as an essential foundation for genuine religious commitment.

Respect for freedom of thought and expression

Respect for freedom of thought and expression follows from respect for the human being. The defining characteristic of humanity is precisely the ability to think and to express one’s thoughts and feelings in words or by other means. To fetter the freedom to do this is to cut off the root of a person’s humanity; it is to truncate the essence of being human.

Since respect for human life and dignity is fundamental to all religious traditions, it follows that respect for the freedom of thought and expression must likewise be recognized as a fundamental principle of religion. The defense of civil liberties is a religious as well as a civic obligation.

Respect for others: the Golden Rule

All that has been said here can be summed up in a principle that, though stated in different forms, can be found in all religious (and many non-religious) traditions: the Golden Rule, that people should treat others as they themselves would like to be treated. As we want others to respect our life and dignity, so we must respect and protect the life and dignity of others; as we want others to respect our freedoms of religion, conscience, thought, and expression, so we must respect and defend these freedoms for others. This ethic of reciprocity, as it is sometimes called, is, in other words, at the very heart of religion.

All religion thus sets as a primary aim the excellence of human character, the development of human beings who from the depth of their selves manifest kindness, compassion, truthfulness, courage, and all the virtues associated with the best of humanity.

Most non-religious people would, of course, affirm these principles we have named. How many of them, however, are aware not only that they are foundational principles of all the world’s faiths but also that our religious traditions provide a strong intellectual, spiritual, and emotional foundation for them? To communicate this reality to the world is an urgent task of interfaith action.

This article was originally published in the Huffington Post, July 1, 2014.