

RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday, November 27, 2011

Q : How can we improve interfaith dialogue?

A : It hasn't always been fashionable to consider seriously faiths other than one's own. My co-worker remembers telling a friend and church-mate that she was soon to marry but not in their small-town church. In total surprise, the friend asked of the groom "Well, what is he then? In their one church community, it seemed unimaginable that someone might worship elsewhere. Now, in our increasingly diverse nation, we are all usually members of one or another minority faith, and "what is he?" is more often the default question.

The Christian-Buddhist dialogue movement has grown over the past few decades, as these different faiths recognize the benefit of learning from each other. In *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*, Perry Schmidt-Leukel proposes three phases of interfaith engagement. At the lowest and least useful level, the one most like adolescent high school debates, each side presents their faith. They analyse, criticize and challenge (even mock or condemn) the other, trying to prove how their faith is vastly superior. Claims of superior logic on one hand or supreme power of one's "book" on the other, keeps both sides from really learning much. The next level is where the mocking or combative element disappears and there

is some attempt to learn, but always from the safe assumption that "my faith is the true one." This is mere tolerance. The third and most useful kind of interfaith dialogue is open to gaining new insights about one's own faith by practising and studying with others in their faith. This Schmidt-Leukel describes as 'the challenge of mutual transformation'.

Interfaith dialogue will improve when the participants in that dialogue move beyond self-promotion and self-defence. The entire project of faith activity is one of opening ourselves up to new and deeper understandings, and in that there can be little room for the kind of smug defensiveness or bitter attacks that hobble too many contemporary inter-faith endeavours. Doubt, risk, open investigation at the intellectual level and sincere respectful sharing at the spiritual level belong in religious dialogue. A closed mind and a closed heart are signs of spiritual stagnation, not vitality.

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