

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, July 31, 2011

Q : Does religion divide or unite people?
A The simple answer is both. Religion isn't one monolithic entity. It is not something you either accept or deny, nor something which acts in a single homogenous way. It is a vast and multi-faceted, multi-cultural, trans-historical phenomenon which grows and changes, over time and nation, as an expression of the people who practice it. As one might expect, something so varied has the capacity to both bring people together and to create divisions. History will verify that.

'Religion' is really more of a verb than a noun. It is an activity, and the activity that we call 'religion' can be described in many ways. I am fond of the definition proposed by Thomas Tweed in his *Crossing and Dwelling : A Theory of Religion*. Tweed begins with the assertion that "religions are not reified substances but complex processes". He proposes that : "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and supra-human forces to make homes and cross boundaries".

The last phrase is central to this question - religions are about making a home and crossing boundaries, about finding a place and moving beyond it. So, religious activity is that which brings us together into a space we call our home - be that physical, like a Promised or Pure Land or a symbolic one. In this sense it unites us.

However, as Tweed notes, religions which stop at home-making becomes stagnant, rigid and ultimately irrelevant. Consequently it must, of necessity, also mean crossing boundaries, that is challenging whatever limits we tend to set on ourselves as humans. The fundamental religious questions begins, as the Zen tradition poses, with "who is this?" Religious practice, certainly in the Buddhist context, continues to ask that question over and over.

Religions, then, fulfill their purpose when they both unite us, that is , give us a sense of home, completion, resting place and identity. They also must divide us, in that they call us to question ourselves, our resting place, our comfort zone, and challenge ourselves with questions which relentlessly dig deeper into the mysteries of human life.

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