

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, February 20, 2011

Q : What should we tell our children about people who don't believe in God?

A : The questions of children can remind us of the same questions we face as members of a spiritually varied world. It would be wonderful if we could be informed enough about the world's faiths that we could help children learn, appreciate and respect the wide diversity of traditions. That is rather a tall order, and so, as a minimum, I would wish that we could approach religious diversity as we would other diversity issues, that is, with a welcoming respect and warm-hearted interest.

We should here contrast an appreciation of diversity and mere tolerance. Tolerance is usually a bland and biased acknowledgment extended from a presumed position of superiority and truth. Respecting diversity comes from the awareness that, as with bio-diversity in our natural world, the whole patchwork of religious diversity enriches and sustains our lives.

Diversity is more than variety too. Its not simply that we describe for children yet another consumer choice - chocolate, strawberry or vanilla, as if all choices were a matter of how you felt at the moment. In Buddhism there

is an expression which says there are "eighty-four thousand ways to the truth". This is not to say that it doesn't matter what you do, but rather it matters that you investigate deeply and personally until you discover the path that provides a coherent and reliable form for your religious practice. Further, it accepts that this path may evolve and grow over time as you mature spiritually. I would want my child to feel the presence of spiritual questions for themselves, rather than that my way, this way or any way could be imposed without thought and reflection.

Whether we are theists, agnostics or atheists, Christians, Buddhists or Wiccans, I would want every child to understand that each person can and should find their own path, and that this come from a deep and sincere quest. Most importantly, we must mirror that respect for diversity in our own attitudes, ensuring we do not mock or condemn those whose response to questions of birth and death do not match our own.

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