

SOCIAL DOCTRINE AND PEOPLES OF THE BOOK

Where does a person's idea of justice come from? Are we born with it? Did humans develop it in the course of evolution? Does it come from God as commandments revealed in the Bible or Koran?

What do Judaism, Christianity and Islam have to say about how humans ought to treat one another? Are religions bound to divide us or are there common threads that bind us together?

What do we make of the ways that people from different religious traditions translate their ethics into law and custom? What should one do when government requires some action that is against one's religious principles? Is self-defense the highest form of morality? Or is giving your life for others the highest form? Is there a difference between morality and ethics?

All these questions and more surfaced during the third Understanding Islam dialogue sponsored by Network for Peace through Dialogue and held at Marymount Manhattan College on November 29. Guest presenters were Michael P. Graff, Esq., a member of the West End Synagogue, a Reconstructionist Congregation; Elizabeth Barre, Ph.D., an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Marymount Manhattan; and Imam Yusuf Hasan, B.C.C., from Malcolm Shabazz Masjid (Mosque).

After the presenters spoke for six to eight minutes about how justice is seen within their traditions, the 15 participants formed small groups for discussion. They then shared some of their thoughts with the whole group.

Michael Graff led off by presenting Judaism as a monotheistic religion in which a belief in God enforces ethical practices. The Hebrew Bible, especially the first five books, lay out the religion's ethical foundation. In Leviticus we find the earliest writing setting out the Golden Rule, that you shall love your neighbor as a man like yourself. If a stranger settles in your land, you are to love him as a man like yourself, because you were aliens in Egypt. Rabbi Hillel famously formulated the idea in the negative as the "Silver Rule": "What is hateful to you, do not do it to your neighbor...."

Because Jews were enslaved in Egypt and God is responsible for their freedom, they are enjoined always to be sensitive to the mistreatment of others.

Two rituals of special importance are keeping the weekly Shabbat a day of rest and undergoing a Bar Mitzvah at 13 years old. In Deuteronomy, all people are instructed to keep the seventh day as a day of rest and to include slaves and animals in the resting period. Other instructions in that book are to remember that Jews were enslaved in Egypt and therefore must open their hearts to anyone who is destitute.

At the Bar Mitzvah a young Jew is required to be bound by the ethical principles of Judaism.

Elizabeth Barre followed up with a look at Christianity from the perspective of the relationship between the religion and politics. She pointed out that there are diverse views among Christians about this and ambiguous foundations to the tradition. On the one hand some believe that Jesus taught that one should lead a moral life, separating that moral life from the state, giving what is Caesar's to Caesar and to God what is God's. One is urged to turn the other cheek in a radical ethic of peace. St. Paul taught a radical pacifism.

Other Christians see Jesus as a militant political figure, turning the tax collectors out of the temple, for instance, and making a statement by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. To some his statement that "I have not come to bring peace but a sword" suggests a battle for justice.

The ethical stances of early Christianity were changed when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and adherence to it was enforced by the state. During medieval times, some argued that the state should be a theocracy. Heretics were put to death. Clergy and laity took up arms to fight in the Crusades.

More changes came about during the religious wars of the Reformation in the 16th Century. The doctrine of the separation of church and state emerged at that time.

All of which is to say that people who today adhere to the different varieties of Christianity that emerged from this history can hold divergent views of morality and ethics.

Yusuf Hasan said that everyone should read the Koran and began by reading aloud Chapter 2 in which one is urged to believe in God and the last days. Some instructions found there are to spend your substance in ransoming slaves and performing other charitable acts. One is also to be careful to fulfill contracts. He also read Chapter 13 which says that God is He who is raised to heaven. He regulates all affairs and we are subject to his laws.

Yusuf said the Koran talks about justice between men and women, both of which have rights over the other in a marriage. In Islam women are to be treated as equals to men and with great kindness and respect.

In general there is no superiority of some people over others, and it is important that you want for your brother what you want for yourself. You are expected to share what you have with the community. During warfare, those captured are to be treated as equals, and there is to be no destruction of houses, animals or plant life.

In his small group after the presentations, Yusuf was pressed to explain more about the attitude of Islam toward women. He said that in Islam men and women are viewed as

equal, but as having biological differences. Although biologically different, they are complementary, the men serving as providers and women as maintainers. When, as an example of the biological differences between the sexes, he said that he believes that women are better able to endure pain than men, as for example, in childbirth, some women in the group protested. That is a stereotype of women, similar to the idea that women are more emotional than men, one participant argued. At the end of the discussion, it was agreed that all three religions began as male-dominated theologies and hopefully will continue to evolve in a more egalitarian direction.

Although many questions emerged from the meeting, all participants felt enriched by the conversation and went home with much to think about. To see an interesting article about the failed attempt of the West End Synagogue to reach out to a Harlem mosque, go to the blog's November archive and click on the comment to the post "Understanding Islam — Session Three."

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