Be particular: Interfaith relations

by Miroslav Volf in the January 25, 2003 issue

This past May, at an interfaith conference in Skopje, Macedonia, I began a keynote address with a few remarks on what it means to speak in a Christian voice in an interfaith setting. Since religious pluralism increasingly defines the American social landscape and since religions are an important factor in the way we relate to each other, it is important for us to reflect on this issue. (You can read about the conference in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.)

Some suggest that all major world religions are at bottom more or less the same. What is significant in each is common to them all. What makes each differ from others is only a husk conditioned by various human mentalities but holding an identical kernel. In *An Interpretation of Religion*, John Hick comes close to this view in arguing, together with Jalalu'l-Din Rumi, that "the lamps are different, but the Light is the same." To speak in a Christian voice from the perspective of such an understanding of religion means to engage in cracking the husk of difference that distinguishes the Christian faith from other religions and displaying the kernel that unites it with them. Whoever speaks authentically in a Christian voice, says Hick, will end up agreeing with representatives of other religions provided they do the same.

While I think that all major religions have much in common, including some fundamental convictions, and that their adherents all possess the same human dignity and therefore command the same respect, I disagree with Hick. It is not clear that all religions are essentially the same. Most of their adherents would disagree with the claim, and would feel that the one making it does not sufficiently respect them in their own specificity but is looking through them in search of an artificially constructed essence.

My sense is that practitioners of religions are right in this regard. Major religions represent distinctive overarching interpretations of life with partly overlapping and partly competing metaphysical, historical and moral claims. To treat all religions as at the bottom the same is to insert them into a frame of meaning without sufficiently appreciating, as Michael Barnes puts it in *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*,

“the irreducible mystery of otherness” of religions. It is because all major religions are not in essence the same that engaging in dialogues is worthwhile; such dialogues are exercises in mutual learning about ourselves and others. Equally, it is because all major religions are not at the bottom the same that their adherents rightly argue with each other about the merits and truth content of their respective religions.

An alternative view claims not only that major world religions represent distinct overarching interpretations of life, but also that what is important in each tradition is precisely the places where they differ. This view is rarely defended theoretically, and represents more of an unreflective way of relating to other religions, a stance toward them. With such a stance, what matters the most, for instance, is not that the children of Abraham all believe in one God, but that Christians believe that this one God is a Holy Trinity whereas Jews and Muslims staunchly object to this claim. To speak in a Christian voice is to highlight what is specific to Christianity and leave out what is common as comparatively unimportant.

But concentrating on differences seems to be a major mistake, and includes a misconception about the proper way to define something. As any introduction to logic will make clear, you cannot define an entity by noting only its specific difference; you must also include in your definition its proximate genus. Human beings are rational animals; “rational” is the specific difference and “animal” is the proximate genus. Applied to the world of religions, what is important about the Christian convictions about God is not simply that God is the Holy Trinity, but also that the Father of Jesus Christ is the God who called Abraham and delivered the Jews from slavery in Egypt, who is, from a Christian perspective, the God whom Muslims worship as Allah. Similarly, what is important about the Christian sacred texts is not only that they contain the New Testament, but also that they contain what Christians call the Old Testament, which is originally a Jewish sacred text, and that there is a significant overlap between Christian and Muslim sacred texts. To think of one’s own or of another religion simply in terms of its differences from one’s own is to fail to respect it in its concreteness.

In fact, both of the above approaches are wrongheaded because they abstract from the concrete character of religions, one by zeroing in on what is the same in all religions and the other by zeroing in on what is different. In this they miss precisely what is most important about a religion—the particular configuration of its elements, which may overlap with, differ from or contradict elements of other religions.

Religions are embraced and practiced in no other way except in their concreteness. To speak in a Christian voice is neither to give a variation on a theme common to all religions nor to make exclusively Christian claims in distinction from all other religions. It is to give voice to the Christian faith in its concreteness, whether what is said overlaps with, differs from or contradicts what people speaking in a Jewish or Muslim voice are saying. Since truth matters, and since a false pluralism of approving pats on the back is cheap and short-lived, we will rejoice over overlaps and engage others over differences and incompatibilities, so as to both learn from and teach others.