

Sharing wisdom: More than easily digested nuggets

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

We live in an age of great conflicts and petty hopes. Take first our hopes. In the book *The Real American Dream*, Andrew Delbanco traced the history of the scope of American dreams—from the “holy God” of the Puritan founders, to the “great nation” of the 19th-century patriots, to the “satisfied self” of many today. With some modifications, America’s yearning for the satisfied self is probably indicative of trends in most societies that are highly integrated into the global market system. The idea of flourishing as a human being has shriveled to meaning no more than leading an experientially satisfying life. The sources of satisfaction may vary: power, possessions, love, religion, sex, food, drugs. What matters most is not the source of satisfaction but the experience of it—*my* satisfaction.

Our satisfied self is our best hope, and it is not petty. But a dark shadow of disappointment stubbornly follows this obsession with personal satisfaction. We are meant to live for something larger than our own satisfied selves, and petty hopes generate only self-subverting, melancholy experiences.

As for conflicts, our world is currently caught in some great ones (as well as in many small, even petty ones). Most of these are fought along religious lines: Christians and Muslims are clashing, as are Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Christians, Buddhists and Muslims, and so on. Though for the most part religions per se are not the cause of these conflicts, religions often legitimize and fuel conflict by enveloping mundane causes—mostly our petty hopes—with an aura of the sacred.

One of the main goals of most religions is to open up self-absorbed individuals and connect them with a broader community and with the source and goal of all reality. Similarly, most religions claim to contain important, even indispensable resources for fostering a culture of peace. But these two functions of religions are often at odds with each other. When religions connect people with the divine, bring people together and offer them a hope larger than mere self-fulfillment, communities with

differing religious beliefs sometimes clash. When religions try to avoid legitimizing and fueling clashes between people, they often retreat into some private sphere and at times even reinforce people's self-absorption.

Here is a central challenge for all religions in a pluralistic world: Help people grow out of their petty hopes so as to live meaningful lives. Help them resolve their grand conflicts and live in communion with others. *And do both at the same time.* That's where the importance of learning to share religious wisdom well comes in. If we as religious people fail to share wisdom well, we will fail those of our contemporaries who are striving to live satisfied lives and yet remain deeply dissatisfied; we will also fail those who are drawing on their religious traditions to give meaning to their lives and yet remain mired in intractable and often deadly conflicts.

But how do we share religious wisdom well? Each religious tradition will have to give its own answer to this question, as well as seek to learn from others in the process of answering it. Here are some elements of the art of sharing religious wisdom as they appear from a Christian perspective—assuming that true wisdom is inseparable from Jesus Christ and that in a fundamental sense it is identical with him.

First of all, we need to resist the temptation to help wisdom gain a footing in people's lives by manipulating or forcing others to embrace it. Similarly, we need to resist the lure of pridefully perceiving ourselves as only givers of wisdom rather than also receivers—and receivers from both expected and unexpected sources. If we give in to these tendencies and force our wisdom on others, we will add to religious conflicts rather than preparing the soil in which religious faith can help resolve them. Our efforts at sharing wisdom should focus on allowing wisdom to shape our own lives and show itself in all its attractiveness, reasonableness and usefulness. We need to trust that it will make itself embraceable by others if it is going to be embraced at all. In that way, we honor both the power of wisdom and the integrity of its potential recipients.

How should we share wisdom so as not to feed petty hopes but instead help persons connect with communities—small and large—and with the source and goal of the universe? We need to resist the temptation to package religious wisdom in attractive and digestible nuggets that a person can take up and insert into some doomed project of striving to live a merely experientially satisfying life. Packaging wisdom this way serves folly. Sharing religious wisdom makes sense only if that wisdom is allowed to counter the multiple manifestations of self-absorption by givers and receivers and to connect them with what ultimately matters—God, whom we should

love with all our being, and neighbors, whom we should love as ourselves.