Teaching about religion in a children's museum

by Kim Lawton

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INDIANAPOLIS (RNS) The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, the largest children's museum in the world, may be a place for fun, but it has also addressed difficult subjects, including the Holocaust, segregation, and AIDS. For the past few months, the museum has taken on yet another potentially controversial subject: world religions.

"We knew when we started planning this not many places are willing to even tackle a conversation about religion, and so it would be challenging," said Chris Carron, the museum's director of collections.

Despite the challenges, the "Sacred Journeys" exhibit has been well-received.

"We went into this expecting the worst might happen," Carron said, "and what we've experienced in many ways is the best."

The exhibit is a partnership with *National Geographic*, funded by the Lilly Endowment. It follows children and families of several faiths as they participate in religious pilgrimages and rituals. In addition to covering religious history and culture, the exhibit explores contemporary beliefs and practices, topics rarely addressed by other children's museums.

"We wanted children to not only understand what they learn in Sunday school, but also know why the girl down the block dresses the way she does, why that boy in school was off for the holiday he was off for," Carron said. "What people believe and how they practice what they believe influences what people do all over the world, and it influences the people in your neighborhood."

The "Sacred Journeys" exhibit includes loaned artifacts such as fabric from the Kaaba in Mecca, a throne built for the Dalai Lama, pieces from a Gutenberg Bible

and the Dead Sea Scrolls, a stone from the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Jewish objects taken into space by Indiana astronaut David Wolf, a replica of the Shroud of Turin, and the Hindu deity Ganesh. Buddhist monks created a mandala, an intricate geometric design made from multicolored grains of sand, which will be destroyed as a demonstration of the impermanence of life.

Carron said the museum wanted “to talk about religion without telling people what they should believe or even that they should believe.”

To help ensure that the exhibit was perceived as being accurate and respectful, the museum assembled an interfaith advisory group of academics and religious leaders. Prominent religion scholar Raymond Williams, LaFollette distinguished professor in the humanities at Wabash College, headed the team.

Williams maintains that because of immigration, in the last 50 years, the U.S. has become the most religiously diverse country in history. While this has led to a vibrant mixing of cultures, he notes it has also created fear and anxiety about the rapid changes.

“You cannot build a democracy … on fear and hatred,” he said. “It has to be built on knowledge and hope.”

He and other experts believe education is the best way to overcome fear and hatred. While many children learn about their own faith tradition in their family’s congregations or in religious schools, there are not a lot of forums where they can learn about other religions.

Some public schools have classes that teach religion, although rarely at the elementary level. Other curriculums have generated controversy because of parental fears that they favor one religion or are too critical of another. Last December, Augusta County schools in Virginia were closed down temporarily after parents worried that a teacher had tried to convert their children to Islam when she asked her high school class to draw the Shahada, the Muslim statement of faith, in Arabic calligraphy.

While it is complicated, many advocates say religion can successfully be addressed in a public arena, as long as constitutional prohibitions against advancing a particular religion are strictly followed.

“We are so afraid in public school to touch the subject of religion for fear that we’re proselytizing—and there is a legitimate concern there,” said Rabbi Sandy Sasso, a Reconstructionist rabbi and author of several best-selling children’s books about religion. “However, we can’t really understand our culture, our civilization without understanding religion.”

She argues the topic can, and should, be addressed at a very early age.

“All children have an innate spirituality, and they like to ask the big questions. It’s really we, who are adults, who are afraid of those questions,” she said. “It’s very important for children to be able to confront these difficult issues because they do confront these difficult issues. They see what’s happening around the world on the news.”

Sasso said teaching children about religion must highlight commonalities among faiths, but at the same time, not shy away from talking about the distinctions.

“Sometimes I fear that in order to try to teach tolerance, we say we’re all alike,” she said. “It’s in acknowledging our differences and celebrating those differences that we come to better understand one another.”

After the “Sacred Journeys” exhibit closes later this month, it will travel to the Mayborn Museum at Baylor University. Several other museums across the country have contacted the Children’s Museum asking for advice about how they, too, can tackle religion.

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