

## Reflections on My Faith

*Editor's Note: This article is the first in a continuing series in which members of the YSU community share their personal faith experiences. The goal of the series is to be inclusive of as many faith traditions as are represented on the YSU campus. Contributors have been asked to communicate the importance of the religious practices in their lives, not to proselytize on the validity of any particular belief system. Submissions to the series are welcome. This article, written by James Morgan, discusses a blend of evangelical and Episcopalian Christianity. The editors thank Mr. Morgan for his willingness to share his story and his courage in being the first to do so in these pages.*

Why am I an evangelical Christian and a member of the Episcopal Church? Our mother faithfully took my sisters and me to a nondenominational church. Some may have called it fundamentalist. The pastor and lay leaders of this church taught that we need to pray to God and read our Bibles everyday. I recall how hard it was to understand the Bible and how awkward it was to pray to God.

When I was fourteen, I came to a more adult understanding of Jesus. At a youth group event, I heard a speaker talk about his faith in Jesus Christ. He was a navy pilot in World War II. I wanted to have faith and courage like him. I made a public declaration of faith that day. I do not remember much of anything this pilot said. I believed that God would accept me unconditionally through Jesus, but I still believed that I had to be a "good" Christian, one who constantly prayed, read the Bible, and shared my faith with others. At these, I perceived, I was failing.

As a high school student, I probably could not have articulated my beliefs. In fact, I wasn't measuring up as a Christian—so I believed—and this is one reason why I chose to go to a Christian college. Entering a conservative Presbyterian school, I thought I knew all about the church, the Bible, and Jesus. What more was there to learn? Much more. I learned how to read the Bible both as literature and as redemptive history. I learned answers to questions that I never thought to ask, such as "how reliable is the Bible?" and "if God is good, why do the innocent suffer?" At the same time, the more I learned, it seemed, the more directionless I felt. At age fourteen, my cry to God was for salvation. About eight years later, my cry was for meaning and identity. I struggled with God and begrudgingly learned that I belong to him and not to myself.

I began dating Diane in my senior year and her junior year. After her graduation and before we decided to get married, we spent a summer in Maine, she as a maid and me working in the produce department of the only grocery store in a small tourist town. In our spare time together, we traveled around that beautiful state. While we were working and having fun, God was preparing us. In Maine, we met a group of Episcopalians. I thought the Episcopal Church was just "Catholic lite" and bereft of the real Jesus. But their love for Christ, their warm reception of us, and their blend of liturgy and contemporary worship music made a huge impression on us.

Diane and I got married not long after we returned to our homes in Pennsylvania. Eventually, we sought out an Episcopal congregation to join—I was still unsure about this "liberal" denomination. Ironically, it is within this Anglican tradition that I have found what I had been missing in my Christian faith. I have come to experience what my preacher and teachers in my childhood were telling me—I can have a real relationship with God.

Within this Anglican tradition and through my parish, I can experience God in the mystery of the Eucharist and affirm my belief in him by stating the ancient creeds. While keeping to the liturgy, we are free to be demonstrative in our worship. And some of the best preaching and teaching of the Bible I have heard has come from Episcopalians.

At age fourteen, I cried for salvation. At twenty-two, I cried for meaning. Beginning around my twenty-eighth birthday, I cried for purpose. In the meantime, I found an administrative and fund-raising job at the Pennsylvania office of an interdenominational Christian organization that conducts work in South America. Although I have sometimes felt a lack of career fulfillment, my job has been a means by which God has used me to help others and has taught me humility.

Through my job and church experiences, I have met many faithful Christians from different backgrounds. What brings us together is not doctrine, although the teachings are important. Instead, what I recognize in them and, hopefully, they in me is love for Jesus Christ and the acceptance of his work.

I embrace the idea that only by God's unearned and undeserved favor could I know God and be with him in eternity. Jesus took on the blame and shame due to me. Some may consider the cross to represent an unnecessary belief in a crude, violent act that lost its ancient symbolism long ago; after all, human sacrifice is repulsive. But, for me, that is the point: it has to be ancient, from the beginning, to be true, and it should be repulsive. By that act, God has shocked so many into understanding their plight. For years, my need to "perform" as a good Christian kept me from experiencing God's grace. It is not what I do as a Christian, but what Jesus has already done, that gives me hope of salvation and meaning and purpose.

—James Morgan  
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## Interfaith Discussion on Death and Dying Held at Local Temple

At 7 p.m. on 12 October 2004, Ohev Tzedek Temple (Boardman) hosted an interfaith seminar on death and dying. The seminar was part of the Community Diversity Series organized by the YSU Diversity Council. Representatives of local Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim communities addressed a gathering of about eighty people. Dr. Nafees Ahmed, who served as moderator, explained that the event was not a conference on theology but an opportunity to understand how to handle the death of someone—such as a friend or a neighbor—belonging to a faith other than one's own.

Dr. Abdul Ghani said that, according to Islam, life in this world is but one phase of existence and that, while death is irreversible, life continues beyond death. He then explained the rites performed at a person's death: the Islamic confessional formula is pronounced, as is the Qur'anic formula, "We belong to God, and it is to God that we will return"; the deceased is covered with a white cloth; the Qur'an is recited; the body is ritually bathed and then put in a white, unstitched shroud; the funeral prayer is made; and, finally, the body is buried, facing Mecca.

Rabbi Joel Berman noted similarities between the Islamic and Jewish approaches to death and dying, observing that the two Middle Eastern religions have a common background. He emphasized that Judaism's main thrust is to embrace life and everything in it and that death is a part of life. Rabbi Berman said that Yom Kippur is, in a sense, an annual rehearsal of death. He said that the rites performed at a person's death include purifying the body, putting the deceased in a casket along with some earth from Israel, and burying the person facing Jerusalem. Cremation, he said, shows disrespect. According to Rabbi Berman, the soul gets separated from the body, but what happens to the soul is unknown. Judaism, he said, does not have a structure of heaven and hell.

Dr. Ahalya Krishnan discussed the Hindu rituals pertaining to death: a lamp is lit, hymns are sung, scripture is read, and prayers are made for the release of the soul from the cycle of birth and death. Also,

the deceased person is laid on a mat or on the ground, facing south, the south being represented by the goddess of death. At a ceremony that is attended by close relatives, the body is cremated, the ashes later being deposited in the sacred Ganges River.

Representing the Catholic community, Msgr. Robert Siffrin said that life continues after death, one's fate depending on how one has lived. Mystery and painful suffering do not negate the meaning of life, said Msgr. Siffrin, adding that it is wrong to hasten the death of the sick and the terminally ill, the latter needing the compassionate care of the living. The right to die, in his words, only too often becomes the obligation to die, as is witnessed by the example of some European countries. The deceased, added Msgr. Siffrin, should be brought to a church, where prayers can be performed for the departed and the relatives given comfort and solace.

Afterward, the speakers answered, each from his or her religious perspective, questions about cremation, suicide, homicide, euthanasia, coma, and terminal illness.

The Catholic Diocese of Youngstown, the Hindu Temple (Liberty Township), the Islamic Society of Greater Youngstown, Ohev Tzedek Temple, and the YSU Diversity Council cosponsored the event.

—Mustansir Mir

## Book Review

Keating, Bernie, Paul Gordon, S. Amjad Hussain, Michael Kelly, Joel P. Miller, and Seigen Yamaoka. *Riding the Fence Lines: Riding the Fences that Define the Margins of Religious Tolerance*. Toledo, OH: BWD Publishing LLC, 2003. 182 pages. ISBN 0-9710723-4-5. PB \$14.95.

Bernie Keating's *Riding the Fence Lines* is a challenging read, not for reasons of theological complexity or highbrow intellectualism, but because of the misleading subtitle. Use of such words as "defining" and "tolerance" creates the impression that the book will actively engage in the often heated, though not necessarily unhealthy, dialogues that occur in comparative-religion studies. This promise fails to materialize in the book.

The diversity of individuals who discuss their personal narratives and their respective faiths is the strongest element of the book and sets it apart from many of the available books on religion. The honesty with which they write is refreshing. It is in their narratives that we get glimpses, perhaps unintended, of the larger perspectives of the challenges in our religiously plural world. These personal elements set the book apart from books that merely discuss history, theology, and religion in its ideal form. These individuals discuss religion in terms of its real-world application.

Fr. Michael Kelly, a Catholic priest, discusses the ongoing violence in his native Ireland, emphasizing the importance of culture and ethnicity that underlies the simplistic notion of Catholic versus Protestant. His discussion on the impact of culture is the most revealing aspect of his essay. Dr. Seigen Yamaoka touches on Buddhism in America and Rabbi Paul Gordon on what it is like to be a self-labeled "Reform-Conserv-Oxdy" Jew (27). All the writers claim a particular faith, but all realize that the demarcations have blurred.

Rev. Joel P. Miller's essay perhaps best explains what riding the fence lines means. Found toward the end of the book, it rescues the metaphor from being redundant. As an Episcopalian, Miller explains the historical meaning of the term *via media* (the middle way), observing that Episcopalians appear Protestant but act Catholic (154), further exposing the limits of labels as definitive.

The longest and most thorough essay in the book is the one by S. Amjad Hussain on Islam. His history of Islam and the challenges that Islam faces in light of recent events is combined with personal narrative in a way that is strong enough to redeem the book from obscurity. That we should not use the

term “tolerance” due to its religiously negative connotations but should talk about acceptance (134) is an astute observation, and this spirit permeates his narrative.

The overarching weakness of the book is the lack of an editor. The book not only has many typographical errors, but it is also marked by inconsistency and lack of cohesiveness. While Keating clearly states that he is not a scholar and that his interest and understanding of other faiths come from his personal experiences around the world and from his contacts with followers of other faiths, he is out of his element when he stops writing autobiographically. Most of his explanations of the various faiths come across as if he is trying to fit into too little space too much information about which he has little perspicacity, rendering his account muddled. Certain personal comments and opinions are out of place. For instance, when discussing an old friend of his whose son did not attend his father’s funeral, he remarks: “How sad when priorities of life get screwed up” (59).

Though he says he is “provocative and somewhat irreligious” (8), his assessment of self is a bit inflated. He merely comes across as insensitive, and his terms are often used ignorantly, frequently lacking definition and context. He refers to nirvana as a wonderful place (39); he drops the phrase “pre-Vatican Two” (60) without introducing it; he drops the term “Hellenic” (60) in similar fashion and delves into the propitiation idea of Christ, comparing it to Mithraism with no further elaboration (69). In his introduction on Islam, several spelling variations make it quite clear that he is using an old, even dated, encyclopedia for his information, which yields the stereotype that Muhammad waged a war against the Jews to take their wealth and that Abu Bakr “used the sword to carry the Koran to the outside world” (100).

Keating’s attempt at giving brief histories of each faith becomes a distraction and is ultimately superfluous. Summarily, he states explicitly that “all religions are based on faith and intuition, not on reason” (72). A certain agitation permeates the book, as the author’s purpose never becomes clear. The book seems to be a platform for Keating to express his personal views and experiences in life – religious and other – with the subject of interfaith dialogue thrown in as an attempt to engage a larger audience who otherwise may not read the book. While his discussions of the faith of the “infidel cowboys” (6) growing up on the South Dakota plains and his interactions with the Sioux are insightful, his essay on his experiences in the Korean War, though touching, feels forced, as is the narrative on his career path and involvement in the tumultuous era of the 1960s.

While the author does a fair job of explaining what it meant to cowboys to ride the fence lines, no clear definition comes forth as to where those margins lie when it comes to religion. The metaphor of “riding the fence lines” only goes so far in the book. Despite the promise of the title, the book provides little depth and stays in safe and well-worn terrain, something too often endemic to religious pluralism in a politically correct culture.

—Arthur Ort  
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