

Spiritual leaders promote inter-religious dialogue

There are few topics that will ignite tempers like religious beliefs, but a panel of spiritual leaders representing Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus and Muslims challenged about 75 people at St. Ignatius, Baltimore, to read the holy books of faiths other than their own.

Ignorance of religious beliefs has not only created friction among neighbors throughout the history of the world, it's resulted in the war-related carnage and bloody holocaust, members of the panel agreed, during a Feb. 12 discussion called "Building Community Across Religious Lines."

Sponsored by St. Ignatius and the Baltimore-Area Jesuit Community, the panel on inter-religious dialogue agreed the world is more pluralistic than it's ever been, but said last month's controversy over Rep. Keith Ellison's congressional swearing in using the Quran is a sign that we have a long way to go in cultivating religious respect.

Conservative political observers and fundamentalist Christian groups called the decision of Congressman Ellison – the freshman Democratic congressman from Minnesota and the first American Muslim elected to Congress – to take his oath of office on Islam's holy book an attack on American culture.

"I think we all agree that was just outrageous," said Joel H. Zaiman, Rabbi Emeritus from Chizuk Amuno Congregation in Baltimore. "Let's face it, there are Christian fundamentalists who want to make this a Christian nation and believe it's a threat to American democracy to allow someone to take the oath of office to Congress on something other than the Bible. It's not enough for us just to be outraged any longer. These groups are large in numbers and have a lot of political power."

Objections to taking the oath on the Quran are contrary to the United States' tradition of free religious expression, said Victoria Barnett, an Episcopal representative on the panel who is also staff director for church relations of the U.S.

Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

"If someone from Congress takes an oath on a scripture that is not of their own faith, what kind of meaning is that vow going to have for that person?" asked Dr. Silva Subramanian, a Hindu representative from the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington. "The oath is more powerful when said on the holy book of your own religion."

The moderator of the panel - John Borelli, national coordinator for inter-religious Dialogue for the U.S. Jesuit Conference - urged Catholics to mingle with people of other faiths and to respect and grasp their beliefs.

"I tell people that to be Catholic is to be committed to inter-religious dialogue," Dr. Borelli said. "I've often found I was whistling against the wind and that it took 9-11 for us to embrace religious pluralism."

Panelist Earl S. El-Amin - resident Iman from the Muslim Community Cultural Center of Baltimore - said it is always interesting to him that when he sees children of different faiths interact, they make no judgments on one another based on race or religion.

The innocence of youth is the essence of the human soul, before they are influenced by biases, he said.

"Put your children together and they will grow and develop together," Mr. El-Amin said. "Put adults of different faiths together and we all start pointing fingers at each other."

More bluntly, Rabbi Zaiman said it amazed him how ignorant most people are about their own religions and called on people to really study the text in their holy books and then to educate themselves by reading the scriptures in other faiths.

"When you really study the sacred texts of another faith, you get a better understanding where they are coming from," he said. "Instead of throwing bricks at one another, read the Bible. Read the Quran."

In Hinduism, the wise speak of respect for different beliefs and to move past tolerance and to accept other faiths by understanding knowledge of that religion

doesn't compromise your own devotion, but strengthens it, Dr. Subramanian said.

St. Leo, Little Italy parishioners Marc Holbert and Candice Cooper attended the symposium to get a better understanding of the different religions before exchanging marriage vows next September.

"You know, a lot of people in this country are afraid of the Muslims, but I think it's the unknown that scares them so much," said Mr. Holbert, a Fells Point resident. "This is a way to explore the unknown and have a better understanding of the perspectives that people of different faiths have."

Ultimately, most people are trying to achieve a truth in their lives, Mr. El-Amin said. "There are 17 paths you can take to get to the same place. For all of us, that place is to God."