

REFLECTION – August 2nd

I'd like to share a conversation about religion I had a few months ago with my co-workers when we were driving to work one morning in Thailand. In the car with me was Ajer, a Muslim from Pakistan; Nilesh, a Hindi from India, now living in Dubai; and Piyawit (whom we call Ken), a Buddhist from Thailand. Overall, the tone wasn't to convert or convince anyone, it was just casual conversation, but it left me with a sense of wonderment from their different perspectives.

The conversation started when Nilesh asked Ken if there were a lot of people from India in this part of Thailand, because he had seen several references to a Hindi religious holiday. "No, no, there aren't Hindi's here . . . maybe we don't practice strict Buddhism . . . we celebrate that Hindi holiday because we like it. Yes, that's a good one." Hmmm, I thought. . . . it's one thing to have St Francis folks join our Jewish friends for a Seder or join our Islamic friends to celebrate the Eid holiday – but quite a different thing to celebrate another religion's holiday when no one among you practices that religion. I wondered about it got started and how it's sustained . . .

We easily transitioned to proclaiming that it didn't matter what religion you practiced, they are all the same really. We all worship God, try to be good to those around us, and ultimately try to get into heaven. And the more they elaborated on the idea of "getting into heaven" and the preparations required, the more I started to question what I was missing. While I've heard of a "judgement day," I honestly have not given any thought to fearing I'd go to hell – or preparing to get into heaven. I just assumed I'd go in! And then I started to wonder . . . if all of the world is preparing for this, what makes me think that I'll be so entitled? Isn't "my" God more accepting and less judgemental?

Someone started to tell a joke about everyone waiting at the gates of heaven and pleading their case to get in. The Muslim's boasted of praying 5 times a day, the Christians of going to church every Sunday, others fasting, making pilgrimages, doing good deeds, and so on. And then there was a group of people who weren't saying anything. The quiet ones were the people born before religion, and of course, they're still waiting. WHAT? I asked what was meant by "born before religion"? I had never heard of that and wasn't sure I understood what it meant. Nilesh offered an explanation that religion was created during Barbaric times as a means of providing structure, rules, civilization. Reflecting or praying multiple times through the day, gave a break to the fighting and killing for survival. Hmmm . . . that didn't sound very spiritual. However, my limited exposure to Middle Eastern religions is that there are a lot of rules: when to pray, which direction to pray, what to wear, what to eat, when to not eat, and so on. On the other hand, Christianity (even in its strictest form) seems much more about invitations or calling to worship and less about expectations or demands to worship. I wondered about the relationships of when religions originated to their practices of worship . . .

Nilesh seemed to think that the terrorism in the Middle East was largely due to practicing a religion for Barbaric times – that hadn't changed for today's modern world. But wait, modernizing religion seems like a contradiction to me. How many of you first came to St Francis because the service, the prayers, the responses, the flow was traditional – was something you recognized or were familiar with since childhood? That tradition, that "sameness" is comforting, even though it's not always in language we would use everyday. How much of that familiarity, those "old" traditions, are what brings us together? I'm not sure about what causes terrorism, but I wonder if "modernizing" our religion would bring us closer or divide us?

Ajer told us that his wife often cites passages from the Quran on his obligation to support her and the kids. (Since Muslims can marry more than once, all of us engineers in the car were more than a little fascinated with a religious book explaining complex math of the logical division among multiple wives and children!) Ajer argued that the passages were written with the intent to protect widows from becoming outcasts in society. How ridiculous in today's world, where his wife has a Master's degree and is more than capable of supporting the family. However, for the rest of us in the car, we all had spouses and children who demand our support. This plays out in many different ways (not necessarily citing religious verses), but it is something we could all relate to, as we all had jobs that required us to travel and be away from our families. And again I wondered . . . how could we be from such vastly different backgrounds and locations across the globe, and how much do we really have in common after all?