

A Message from our Pastor



Rev. Philip D. Reifenberg

January 17, 2021

Dear Parishioners,

Living, as we are, under the Cloud of COVID, we probably owe it to ourselves and to one another to point out such silver linings as do appear where and when they pop up. Such happened for me last Monday night.

For the past ten years, I've been part of a book club that meets on the second Monday of the month from 7:00 to 8:30/9:00 at the Islamic Resource Center on South 27th Street in Milwaukee. The membership has fluctuated wildly over the years – we've had as many as 25 participants on some occasions and as few as three on a couple. Sometimes, the weather is the problem; sometimes, it's the book. (People will tend to vote with their feet if they've lost interest in the title under discussion.)

For a while, we had three or four professors from UWM attending; they were marvelous contributors to the conversation. Several other of our members or retirees (or should be!). It's pretty evenly divided, gender-wise. We are Christians (predominantly Catholic), Muslims, a couple of Jews, and occasionally someone who's "searching."

When the group first started meeting, I was still at Nativity of the Lord in Cudahy, so it was an easy five-minute drive for me. But within its first year, I'd transferred to St. Dominic's in Sheboygan, and the trip became an hour-long drive each way. Still, I persisted because I found the group and our discussion stimulating. And I stayed with it after coming to STA and SJB. Every so often the weather would throw a monkey wrench my way, but for the most part I've continued to make the monthly second Monday drive faithfully over the years.

Until COVID. Like most public facilities, the IRC closed down for the first few weeks of the pandemic. After it re-opened, few book club members were willing to drive there only to sit around socially distanced from one another to try to discuss a book through facial masks. The alternative? ZOOM! And with ZOOM, the silver lining: not only am I spared an hour-long drive to and another hour-long drive home from the meeting; and not only can regular members who are snow-birding in Arizona continue to participate; but a guest can be invited to join in for the purpose of making a special contribution to the discussion. This is what transpired last Monday.

The book we were finishing is The Abrahamic Religions by Charles Cohen. Cohen used to teach at UW-Madison, but is now retired and living in Lower Michigan. One of our members had worked with him on a panel discussion a few years ago; she had kept in touch with him and decided to invite him to ZOOM in with us for a "Q&A with the author" session. He agreed.

It was a truly enriching session. Cohen explained his purpose in writing the book: to present historical and doctrinal information about the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – not to "water down" the differences or to try to make an amalgam of the three very distinct religious traditions, but to enhance mutual respect and facilitate dialogue between the adherents of the three Faiths. He went on to answer questions and offer clarifications on points made in the book.

At one point, which seemed to come out of nowhere but actually permeates The Abrahamic Religions, he professed that his favorite passage in all of Scripture is aya [verse] 48 of the Fifth Sura [chapter] in the Qur'an:

Unto every one of you We appointed a different law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community; but He willed it otherwise in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you must all return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.

One of my favorites, too. Just before people left the ZOOM session, we turned to a small matter of business: our next book. Over the past week, members had voted on their top two choices, and the single title that garnered the most votes was Isabel Wilkerson's Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents. (If this book sounds familiar, it may be because I quoted her definition of empathy in this space a couple of weeks ago.) When this choice was announced Monday night, Charles Cohen picked up a copy of Caste from his desk and said he just been invited to take part in panel discussion on it in Lansing early next month! We invited him to come back to our second Monday book club session in February.

See all the silver linings emerge from behind the cloud?

Father Phil