

Combating Hatred and Intolerance with Wisdom

A 12 Step Vision for Religious Communities and their Leaders Offered by Scholars and Religious Leaders of the Elijah Interfaith Institute

The daily news makes us increasingly aware of growing hatred and intolerance in our global society. Much of this hatred is aimed at other religions. Too many people have been led to believe that in order to be faithful to their religion and defend its truth, they must denigrate and reject people of other faiths and adopt attitudes and actions of disrespect and intolerance. While Islam has been at the forefront of recent expressions of religious hate, the problem is global and affects all our religious communities. All our religious traditions are both vulnerable to hateful attacks from others and susceptible to exploitation as a basis for hostility and intolerance toward others.

The quest for happiness and wellbeing is common to all of humanity, and yet we are all capable of practices that get in the way of such happiness. Therefore, dealing with religiously-based hatred is a major challenge for religious leaders worldwide, in the service of their communities.

We, scholars and religious leaders, affiliated with the Elijah Interfaith Institute, would like to share our experience and vision with religious communities, in the hope of stemming the tide of religiously based hate. We offer the following 12 points, as a common ground for all religions, based on our common quest for wisdom, with the hope of inspiring reflection and action that will bring us closer to peace and harmonious living. These 12 points are broken down in light of three main wisdom teachings, recognized by all world religions.

I. KNOW YOURSELF

The great principle of the spiritual life, that is common to all our traditions is self-knowledge. Without proper self-knowledge, we are prone to behavior that we may not be aware of and that we may ultimately not really believe in. Self-knowledge provides the foundation for combating intolerance, violence and religious hate.

1. Stop and think. The wise stop and think before they speak and act.

Explanation: We often pick up attitudes from our environment, and find support for attitudes and actions among our peers. We may be well intentioned members of religious communities who do not consider ourselves hateful or intolerant. But good intentions are not a guarantee of right action. The first counsel of wisdom is to stop and think. View yourself from the outside, take nothing for granted, consider whether what you say is really what you believe and what your tradition teaches you. Break the cycle of automatic behavior and of the negative hysteria, even if these have been generated in the name of your religious tradition.

2. Be aware. The wise are alert and constantly monitor their own attitudes.

Explanation: Much of our behavior in the personal and collective arena stems from lack of awareness. Examine yourself. Could there be attitudes in you that might reflect hateful intolerance and lack of acceptance of the other? Have you fallen into the kind of self-righteousness wherein your own value comes at the expense of the other? Has your religious enthusiasm blinded you to negative or even violent tendencies that have crept into your thoughts and actions? Do such tendencies really cohere with the teachings of your religion?

3. Recognize fear. The wise recognize fear, and combat it with knowledge.

Explanation: Hate is sometimes the result of fear. One fears the unknown, and one may be fearful of other religions because one does not know them, or their practitioners. Identify any fear within yourself, and overcome it by obtaining knowledge about other faiths. Do not let fear rule you.

II. PRACTICE THE GOLDEN RULE

One of the most fundamental teaching of all our religions is the golden rule. It states that you should do unto others as you would want to have done unto yourself. This principle of reciprocity is articulated in all world religions, without exception. Practicing the golden rule can help us advance in combating intolerance and the hate it breeds.

4. Find the Good in the other. The wise find what is good in the other. This is their truth.

Explanation: Hate is often founded upon presenting the other in a distorted light that brings out the worst in the other. Would you like to be presented based on the acts of a few people whose teachings do not represent your view? Seek to represent the other in a way that is true to historical facts and to the self-understanding of the other. Do not manipulate information about other faiths. Represent them as fairly as you would want them to represent you. And always, seek to find what is good about them.

5. Get to Know the other. The wise get to know the other personally.

Explanation: Fear and hatred are the products of ignorance. If we do not know the other, we easily portray the other in negative terms, born of our fear. Get to know the other in his/her reality. Get to know the other personally. Life looks different when we have friends. And the clash between peoples and religions is radically transformed when we have even a single friend from another tradition. It is appropriate to criticize, to have difference of opinion and disagreement. That happens between friends as well. But make your disagreements the disagreements of friends. No matter what you hear about people of other faiths, remember that they are human beings, with much more in common with you than is different.

6. Understand the viewpoint of the other. The wise consider the viewpoint of the other.

Explanation: It is not enough to know the other as portrayed by an external source of knowledge. We must understand how the other understands himself/herself, even if we do not see eye to eye with him/her. Only by understanding the other as he or she does can we have compassion and the kind of understanding that cures hatred. Imagine yourself in the shoes of the people of another religion. If the problem at hand did not concern another religion, but your own, how would you respond? Would your responses be the same?

7 Do not generalize or stereotype. The wise do not generalize.

Explanation: Each of our religions has various expressions, faces and ideologies. With some we identify, others we reject. No religion is a monolith. Therefore, do not make claims about all members of a religion - Jews, Muslims, Hindus, or of an entire religion as such - Islam, Buddhism. Speak of an individual person, a specific teaching, the problem at hand. Do not use specific incidents involving practitioners of a religion to condemn the tradition in its entirety. Condemn the evil acts, not all members of the faith. Again, think of the diversity of views within your own faith tradition, and how unfair it would be for you to be held responsible for the attitudes and actions of others in your tradition who do not represent your perspective at all.

8. Speak out Against Hate. The wise speak out against wrongdoing.

Explanation: When we are down and under attack we want others to stand up for us. If you see another faith attacked, do for them as you would have done for yourself. Speak out against what you identify as hateful, stand in solidarity with those who are being persecuted and who are victims of hatred. Remember that no one is immune to persecution. Today, the victims may be people of another faith. Tomorrow, it could be you.

III. SEEK WISDOM

A wise person cannot be intolerant, nor can she hate. Wisdom is one of the deepest quests of our religions, and all our religions recognize the value of wisdom. Wisdom provides an antidote to hatred, violence and intolerance. The wisdom of our traditions is a response to intolerance. The test, the true fruit of our religions, is found in the ideal of wisdom, not in the extremism that relies on one sided reading of Scripture and superficial religious enthusiasm.

9. Get correct knowledge. The wise seek reliable information about other faiths.

Explanation: We all suffer from inadequate knowledge, concerning the other. Much of our knowledge comes from the media. It is the media's job to simplify and to provide headlines. But the media can often play a negative role in stirring conflict. Do not consider the media authoritative. Learn about the other, get first hand knowledge, find

facts out for yourself. Ensure that your sources of knowledge are reliable and not tainted. Ensure your information has not been manipulated for political gain. Consult scholars and experts of the tradition, from it and outside it, in attempt to obtain the most reliable knowledge you can.

10. Learn the lessons of history. The wise learn the lessons of history: Violence and destruction are always regretted.

Explanation: History is full of moments of burning the books of the other. Books of Jews were burned by Christians in the middle ages, and by Nazis during the so called Third Reich. With the passage of time and maturing of understanding these became sources for regret. No one looks back with pride today at injuries inflicted in the past. Why do something that you, or your descendants, will regret?

11. Practice Humility. The wise are humble.

Explanation: Religious hatred and intolerance come from arrogance about ones own faith, knowledge, or virtue. True virtue consists of humility, which is the sign of wisdom. It is a spiritual strength, not a weakness. Humility leads us to recognize that our knowledge of God is always partial, and that no one has a monopoly on wisdom. We can always learn from others, even from those with whom we disagree on important matters. A humble attitude to others will open the gates to acknowledging the wisdom of the other, thus enriching our experience of our own faith.

12. Share wisdom. The wise recognize wisdom wherever it is found and share it.

Explanation: Wisdom is one of the highest fruits of the religious life. Seek it in your tradition, be open to sharing it with others and recognizing it in other traditions. All religions are fountains of wisdom and the love that flows from it. Sharing wisdom will open the doors of friendship and acceptance and provide an antidote to hatred and intolerance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we call upon all religious leaders, our brothers and sisters in faith, to look deep within and to identify the sources of intolerance and violence not only within our traditions but also within our own hearts. The keys to world peace are in our hearts. Let us purify and open our hearts so that we find the good in the other, practice love and compassion and work together for the happiness and wellbeing of all.

The Elijah Interfaith Institute will continue to provide resources and direction in the quest for spiritual information through sharing wisdom.

The Elijah Interfaith Institute