

June 26, 2013, WTE Editor's Headline: "An Honest Chat about Jesus"

The Cheyenne Interfaith Council has offered multiple perspectives on Bible teachings or biblical figures for several years now. This year's series was on the figure of Jesus, and it drew the biggest crowds yet. For four weeks in a row, every Thursday evening audiences streamed into the Cottonwood Room of Laramie County Library to hear that week's speaker.

Jesus is said to have asked his disciples, "Who do the people say I am?" The Council used the question as springboard for reports that gave Islamic, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, and Disciples of Christ perspectives.

Without fail, the question-and-answer session that followed each presentation was the evening's high point. Audience questions and comments often engendered lively debates. The curiosity of attendees, and their readiness to respect differing points of view, suggested a willingness to examine church dogma as well as personal beliefs.

Dr. Mohamed Salih, recently-retired LCCC dean and teacher, opened the proceedings with a power-point show that highlighted tenets of the Quran. The Islamic faith holds that, though we all carry the spark of the divine within us, only God is divine. There is no Son of God except insofar as we are all God's creation. Any inspired human being, however godly he or she might appear, is not an incarnation but a prophet of God.

Rabbi Harley Karz-Wagman, who is also a lawyer, explained that Jews do not consider Jesus the longed-for Messiah; rather, he was a fellow Jew who in his lifetime was a prophet and teacher, and who became a myth. In the Torah, ancient sages prophesied that the Messiah's—the Christ's—arrival would drastically change our earthly existence: universal love and justice would reign. Peace would come, not only to humanity but also to the entire planet: lion and lamb would lie down together. The anticipated figure of the Messiah is not, however, God's incarnation; hence, we may pray for a Messiah but not to him. God is deemed divine and supreme; the concept of a trinity is foreign to Jewish thought. Since God is ultimately forgiving, there is no need for intercession by an intermediary, Son of God or Saint.

The rabbi stressed that "Whatever theological differences exist, the core values of Islam and Judaism overlap almost completely with those of Christianity."

The Unitarian Universalist (UU) credo, explained by the Reverend Audette Fulbright, accepts all denominations within its embrace. It is devoted to fostering social justice, advancing equality for all humans, and alleviating the plight of fellow sufferers. No hierarchies exist in the UU church; all decision-making discretion lies within the congregation. Each member shapes his or her own beliefs as regards Jesus.

UU members do share a covenant that is reaffirmed every Sunday: The congregation reiterates that "love is the spirit of this church and service its cause" and extends the pledge to "dwell together in peace, to seek truth, and to help others."

Rev. Fulbright explained that her title of "Reverend" does not suggest a revered individual; it means a person who reverts.

Reverend Jose Morales, Regional Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) presented a Christian, cross-cultural perspective. He explained that some of his churches take the bible literally, while others deem certain biblical pronouncements metaphorical.

Rev. Morales began by quoting diverse scriptural depictions of Jesus, including one that proclaims that Jesus is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” He then asked: Which Jesus is the permanent one? Whose Jesus? The conqueror in the name of the cross? The androgynous or feminist Jesus? The personal savior? The “status quo” Jesus? He concluded that the gospels are approximations of an indefinable mystery, and that a calamitous Christendom pretends to know too much about Jesus. To attempt to codify Jesus is erroneous, he said. We cannot “possess” Jesus, but we know that Jesus stood with the poor, the needy, and marginalized. As followers of Jesus, we are called to do the same.

Here are some questions put to the speakers:

Dr. Salih was asked to explain the concept of jihad; the difference between Sunni and Shii; the role of women in Islam, and whether a goal of Islam is to convert people to its True Faith.

Rabbi Karz-Wagman was asked about the Garden of Eden, the Jewish perception of an afterlife, the idea of original sin. Was the (re)establishment of the state of Israel a sign of imminent changes?

Reverend Fulbright was asked about the divine as expressed in the seminary degree of “Divinity” and in expressions like “His Holiness the Pope” and “His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” Do UU members simply “make up” anything they want to believe?

Reverend Morales was asked about contradictory or competing views of Christian concepts: the virgin birth and the trinity; punishment versus forgiveness of sins; the meaning—or lack thereof—of human existence, and the elusive possibility of an afterlife.

Each presenter offered personal views as well as those of his or her parishioners across a spectrum of ideas. These were left for the audience to sort out.

In an increasingly secularized society, where religious doctrines may appear quaint, antiquated, or irrelevant, it’s worth distinguishing an abiding faith from unquestioned adherence to ritual. “Let’s not throw out the baby with the bathwater,” was one pertinent view offered by several presenters.

No doubt questions remained among listeners and perhaps presenters as well. “We’ll set up a venue again next year,” said the Rev. Rodger McDaniel who, together with John Peacock, arranges the series.