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Expanding circles of identity

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Expanding circles of identity (Thinkstock photos/Getty Images)

Religion seeks to give a sense of meaning and direction to human existence, providing us with understanding of who and what we are.

Accordingly it is inextricably bound up with the different components of our human identity -- as individuals, spouses, members of families, communities and nations.

These are the expanding circles of our human identity, each of which has its place and value. We ignore these different elements of our make-up at our peril. Indeed, sociological analysis indicates that much of the problems of alienation and disorientation within modern society are the result of a loss of traditional components of human identity.

These circles of human identity should spiral outwards from the smaller spheres such as family, through the larger, such as community and nation; to ultimately embrace the widest circles uniting all people in universal human solidarity. However when these smaller spheres perceive themselves as threatened, physically or psychologically, the opposite happens. They do not open out towards wider circles of human identity, but close themselves off from others, isolating themselves in order to protect the component of identity that is perceived as threatened. Under such circumstances, religion all too often becomes part and parcel of that insularity, even nurturing and exacerbating it.

In order to free communities from fears and suspicions that isolate them from others, we have not only to address their physical security, but also to counter-act misrepresentations, bigotry and stereotypes that make up barriers of suspicion and hostility that alienate one community from another. Because religion is so profoundly bound up with all aspects of human identity, inter-religious understanding is crucial to the process of breaking down prejudicial barriers and for generating mutual respect and trust.

As we become more and more interdependent upon one another to ensure a sustainable ecosystem for our common future, the need to comprehend and respect one another becomes all the more acute. Religion is central to our communities' identities and ethos; therefore East-West inter-religious understanding is central to this imperative.

For effective engagement in this field, we are in need of what might be called theological humility. All of our traditions emerge out of specific cultural contexts. None of them can encompass the whole spectrum of human experience and wisdom. Moreover, truth, reality or the Divine Presence is greater than any one tradition. Accordingly, we need to be open to the others' spiritual and moral insights.

Swedish Lutheran Bishop Krister Stendahl recommends that we follow three ground rules for inter-religious dialogue. Firstly, always view the other community according to the best within it. Secondly, strive to understand others as they understand themselves. And finally, leave room for holy envy. It is no act of disloyalty to one's own tradition, to be able to see something of special beauty and insight in another.

East-West inter-religious dialogue must focus on the discovery of the beauty and wisdom of different traditions in the East and West. Accordingly, programmatic activity -- whether through meetings or publications -- must enlighten our own communities with insights from other traditions, on the subjects and issues of importance to our well-being and sustainable future. Then, we will be better able to perceive the reality that we are all limbs of one body; all valuable contributors to our collective wisdom that must be drawn upon for the good of all humankind and planet.

Rabbi David Rosen is International Director of Inter-religious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee. He is in Delhi for a Hindu-Jewish Dialogue.