

Waiting for Religion 2.0

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My parents raised me as best they could to be a global citizen. They supported civil rights long before it was cool to do so in the suburbs, and reinforced a vision of “America the multicultural” through social activism and copious amounts of dinner table conversation.

But there were powerful forces arrayed against my developing a pluralistic outlook as a young child. To begin with, the very average suburb in which I lived was as multicultural as the cast of “Leave it to Beaver.” For those of you who are not members of AARP, “Leave it to Beaver” was a popular TV show in the 1950s and 1960s that supposedly portrayed a typical American family that consisted of a dad who went to the office, a stay-at-home mom with perfectly coiffed hair who did housework in an evening gown, and kids who always had a clean, safe park to play in. Everyone was white, and, for the most part, employed, friendly and apparently normal. To reinforce this non-pluralistic worldview, my elementary school used textbooks that talked about the conquest of America by European settlers as though it was a great deal for everyone. African-Americans and Native Americans were given very little mention, and certainly no voice at all.

But of all the forces at work against the development of a global perspective, religion was the most powerful. Like most people, my religious options were limited to those determined by geography and family. While my family encouraged me to learn about diverse spiritual viewpoints, local church officials did not. To them other religions were interesting in a National Geographic kind of way, but were viewed largely as contaminants to be avoided, a perspective that I have come to appreciate is very typical among the devoutly religious. Because we never talked about the bigger picture of global religion in church or in school, we also never talked about the fact that every religion portrays itself as the one and only true path to God, and therefore beyond question and worth defending at all costs. As a young child this wasn't a problem because the newsreels I watched in school about other religions portrayed them as so bizarre that I felt lucky to live where I did. Hindus were portrayed as strange people without cars who let cows roam the streets at will, and Muslims apparently spent all day praying while listening to a kind of music that was so strange it felt threatening. It was all very exotic, strange and, fortunately, very far away.

But that was before the Internet, the jet engine, and international cell phones made us all neighbors and added some humanistic detail to the picture we all had of one another. Now we are all reminded on a daily basis that whatever religion we belong to is just one of many and that the idea of there being only one true path to God is obviously a flawed notion. This has produced the most important conundrum of our day which, if not addressed, will certainly help

fracture the world if not destroy it: how do we begin teaching our children that there are many religious paths one can take, and that a primary purpose of each should be to respect all of them? This is the goal of religion 2.0.

Modest beginnings are not hard to find. As citizens and parents we could call upon religious leaders to take a moment to acknowledge other religions during religious ceremonies. We could also begin teaching our children the difference between faith and knowledge, and that the inability to distinguish between the two can lead directly to unspeakable acts of inhumanity. The least we could do is stop using God as a scapegoat for the wars we wage on each other. While it's true that most wars are economic, rarely do soldiers charge into battle for the sake of money. Usually, they do so for the sake of their queen, their country or their god.

Whatever we do, religion 2.0 demands that we champion the idea of God as a divinity that subsumes, embraces and connects all of religion's little gods. In practical terms, perhaps a starting point might be for religious leaders from across the theological spectrum to regularly appear in public dialog. Photo sessions in which they do no more than share tea, or play a quiet game of croquette, could make the world a much safer place. If humankind were really lucky, religious leaders might officially begin religion 2.0 by resolving on TV to amend their holy books to begin with these words: *The following is an opinion.*

My guess is that there are millions of people like me who are waiting for religion 2.0 before considering joining a church of any denomination. Should

religion 2.0 ever come about I will go shopping for a belief system that best fits my idealistic vision of what the world could be. In the meantime, there's the issue of what to believe until religion 2.0 takes hold. Given that faith provides a respite from rational analysis, allow me to be faithful for a moment by saying that I \continue to believe in the spiritual perspective that underpinned the global outlook that I received from my parents: whatever deity is really in charge of temple earth is obviously at least as large as all of us, plays no favorites and wishes no part of creation any harm.