

# Empathy is key to a just society

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In this time of electioneering and social unrest in our nation, many of us are asking ourselves what the key elements are of a society that respects both our needs as well as those of others. A related question is whether our traditional religions have anything to tell us in that regard.

In considering the kinds of governmental policies we would like to see, we tend to begin with our own personal needs, and too often don't get much farther. And yet this standard of personal self-interest conflicts with fundamental principles common to religions.

Instead of just "me" as a priority to be served by our society and our actions, our religions propose a broader standard of behavior, whose essence is the Golden Rule embodied in one form or another in all the world's religions. In Christianity this is expressed as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In Judaism it is said, "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man; that is the entire law, all the rest is commentary." In Islam, "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." And in Buddhism, "Hurt not others with that



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which pains yourself."

A thoughtful friend often reminds me that when we are considering the fairness and justice of our actions regarding others, the real test is whether we would be willing to trade places with

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them. In that light, how do our current positions on government and society stand up? Applying my friend's "Golden Rule" test in dealing with our national and state budget crises, as we struggle

with the question of what are fair and just levels of taxation and social services, what should be our position on a system that leaves millions of people without health insurance and proposes to cut basic services to the poor and unemployed? If we were to trade places with those in need, would we consider that failure of service just?

While we will always have differences of opinion on issues such as these, how we speak to

and about each other is also a test of this common standard. Since a frequent reference point in our country tends to be Christianity, how do we view the biblical statements of Jesus that "whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council," and "whoever says 'You fool' shall be liable to the fire."

Actually caring for each other in both actions and words, another term for which is empathy, is crucial to establishing a more

just society. Unless we can put ourselves in another's shoes, it will be hard to understand them and to be fair to them in our actions and social structures.

Quakers, whose tradition I am a part of, speak of recognizing "that of God" in all persons, and in more modern times in all of creation. Doing this is an important way to get beyond the outer appearances that offend us in others, and to help us realize our spiritual unity.

Whatever faith perspective we come from, whether organized religion or a fundamental sense of relatedness to the world, our unity demands mutual respect for others at home and abroad.

In advocating on policy decisions confronting us, and in voting on candidates whose actions show either the presence or absence of empathy with others, if a more just society is our goal we will choose carefully based on past conduct as together we help to determine our common future. Often these decisions can be summarized as choosing between the "Me" or the "We" policy or candidate. I hope we choose wisely.

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