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Can We Talk?
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Are the world's two largest religions, Christianity and Islam, able to talk to each other with civility? Can they work out their differences through dialogue rather than insults and violence? In recent months, two leaders, one from each religion, have attempted to start a dialogue with the other in a bid to lessen tensions, reduce violence, and work toward peace. Both failed.

Can we talk? Not if the recent experience of Pope Benedict is any indication. In his lecture at the University of Regensburg on Sept. 12, in which he called for dialogue between the two religions and even cited with approval a passage from the Quran, part of his speech unintentionally insulted Islam and sparked Muslim protests against Christianity. Four different apologies by Benedict, an incredible level of public contrition for a pope, have only recently begun to calm the situation. Rather than promoting dialogue, the Pope created further frictions.

Can we talk? Not if the letter from Iran's President Ahmadi-Najad to President Bush is any indication. The letter attempts to find agreement between Christianity and Islam in their mutual respect for Jesus and his message, and to use that common ground to call for peace among nations. It tries to open a religiously-based conversation about how the United States and Iran could settle their differences. Unfortunately, the letter's ideas are so imbedded within an Islamic world view that they fail to resonate with Christians. The Bush administration dismissed the letter out of hand.

The problem is that despite their desire and attempt to communicate across religious lines and to reduce tensions, neither religious leader knows enough about the other religion to accomplish it successfully. Their own religion has so powerfully shaped their perception of the world and God's purpose in the world that the other is an unknown territory.

It is impossible to imagine Islam from within Christianity, or vice versa, because they are not "essentially the same." To take a biological analogy, grizzlies and black bears are alike because both belong to the category of "bear." Christianity and Islam are not this close. They are more like fish and antelope. Some similarities exist, but not many. Furthermore, some similarities actually hide differences. Fish and antelope breathe air, but one uses gills, the other lungs. Both circulate blood, but one is cold-blooded, the other warm-blooded.

Is there no hope then for dialogue? Should the world expect decades of conflict because these two religions cannot find common ground? No, there is a way through this difficulty.

Just as the universities have often been the birthplace of new technology, providing the discoveries fueling our technological economy, so too they can provide new ways of viewing the world. One key area that has made great strides in recent decades is Religious Studies. This field arises out of the secular university, but it is respectful of religions.

Rather than viewing religions antagonistically or as fossils, Religious Studies recognizes their importance and their roles in shaping society, as well as their impacts on culture and its debates. The field studies religions, aiming to understand their components and their dynamics, exploring the ways their followers organize themselves, lay out and follow moral principles, worship their god(s), and believe their theologies. It compares how different religions accomplish these tasks, and so brings broad insight into the nature of religions in general.

In the end, if two religions wish to talk, each religion needs to understand the other to do so successfully. Religious Studies can supply that understanding.

To close, let me suggest three ways this could be done. First, universities and colleges already offer to their students education in world religions. This effort needs to be broadened and expanded, and perhaps even brought into the K-12 system, as many European countries have done.

Second, religious leaders who hope to engage in cross-religion dialogue should hire advisers trained in Religious Studies, and listen to their advice.

Third, successful negotiations between countries in conflict often take place under the aegis of neutral countries, as in the recent Lebanese conflict. Perhaps the same model should be used to establish dialogue among two religions in conflict. People trained in Religious Studies, who understand the religions but are neutral, could provide such a negotiating umbrella.

In this time of increasing religious conflict and the failure of attempts at dialogue, it is time to use the knowledge and tools that Religious Studies provides to chart a new future for relations among religions.