

## Windows to God—Openings to Peace

Article by Pax Christi member Jim Bailey of Fostoria

On a recent Friday evening, as part of a "Just Faith" Catholic social teachings study group, I had the privilege of visiting the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo or, in other words, the mosque along I-75 south of Perrysburg. It was family night at the mosque and after touring the Center and learning some of the fundamentals of Islam, our small group of three Catholics and four Protestants was invited to dinner. The evening with our Muslim-American neighbors of northwest Ohio was a delight.

Among those present was Dr. Amjad Hussain. Two days later in the Toledo Blade Dr. Hussain was quoted in response to a question about the possibility of different faiths living together harmoniously as saying "The interfaith problems, I have a problem and my problem is, sure we can hold hands and say all kinds of nice things and we are brothers and sisters, but then why do the preachers and imams go back to their own institutions and preach that we are superior? How can you be equal and superior at the same time? No, you have to break that mindset."

Dr. Hussain went on to say that while he believes in and practices his faith to the best of his ability, he is not so arrogant as to believe that he is better than a Christian or a Jew or a Hindu. The good doctor has in other words pointed to one of religion's greatest problems: how can people believe without conferring superiority on themselves and inferiority to people who do not have the same beliefs?

The problem is of immense importance to humanity because of our long-standing prejudice, discrimination and slaughter based on religion. A beginning of a solution would be the recognition of the fundamental fact that the religious affiliation of a very large majority of people is determined by their accident of birth. There are converts, but worldwide, most people of faith inherit their religion rather than choose it because of any "superiority".

It should not be forgotten that in the last century more than a hundred million people were killed because of another accident of birth, nationality. In terms of superiority-inferiority beliefs and willingness to die and kill, religion and its secular cousin, nationalism, have much in common. We would do well to spend less time congratulating ourselves on our choice of parents and more on learning about others.

Interfaith contact such as our "night at the mosque" and more intensive study will surely show that various faiths have more in common than not. The commonalities may include matters of great importance, whether they be positives such as concerns for peace and for the poor and rules of conduct, or negatives such as fire-eating, violence-promoting, so-called fundamentalists caught up in the "superiority (us) -inferiority (them) syndrome". Such specific commonalities concern matters of great importance but of far more importance would be a recognition and appreciation of the holiness of the common great historical experiences of various faiths, including the search for and response to God, transcendent spirituality and the search for morality, meaning, and answers to the hardest and most important questions of life.

Knowledge and appreciation of these common sacred experiences has led me to think of organized religions as "windows to God". My cherished inherited window is Christianity. I believe in it. It does not make me feel superior to anyone. Sometimes my holy window seems clear or open and I feel the presence of God. At other times the window seems clouded or closed and I struggle for understanding and inspiration. I have learned that this struggle is common among devout believers of many of the great religions.

As a Christian, I believe in the Holy Spirit. I sometimes feel it in worship in the Presbyterian church to which I belong, especially during communion. But I have also felt it while kneeling in a Catholic church. During my recent visit to the mosque I felt strongly what I believe was the holy presence of God. In fact I have many times experienced feelings of powerful holiness in places of worship of different faiths -- different "windows to God".

The heart of my Christian faith comes from the commandments of Jesus to love God and to love our neighbors and even our enemies. Our neighbors scattered over the continents of the holy Creation have in their spiritual experiences developed distinctive theologies and religious practices. At a minimum, as long as they don't hurt others of God's children, they deserve toleration and respect. Beyond that, as brothers and sisters in the family of humanity, a humanity that struggles with understanding and existence, they deserve affection, love and praise for their searches for what is holy and most meaningful.