

# Among religion's 3 C's, 'cooperative' is the ideal



**Highland Views**  
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Columnist

One of the great modern scholars, mystics and social activists, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote, "Religion becomes sinful when it begins to advocate the segregation of God, to forget that the true sanctuary has no walls" (from "God in Search of Man").

If the rebel rabbi was correct, then what are we to think, what are we to do, about contemporary religion? Has religion itself become "sinful"? Does a faith that espouses a separation of the divine and human, sacred and secular, miss the mark (classic definition of sin) when it sets itself apart as the sole container for the Creator?

Hold those questions.

When facilitating classes and discussion circles, I sometimes draw attention to the "Three C's" as they relate to religion: competitive, comparative, cooperative.

Competitive religion may be the most familiar. It's fairly simple. People think, say or imply: "Our beliefs and our God are better. We win!"

No one usually says that, but we know competitive faith when we see or hear it. "God's on our side" or "We are God's favorites" is the attitude. There are clear winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, saved and unsaved. "Heaven is for us — Hell is for you." This reminds me of dodgeball games we played as kids, or any competitive sports. Someone comes out on top, others are eliminated.

Comparative religion was my favorite

subject to study and teach for a long time. I still appreciate this more-academic approach. It can be quite interesting to place faith traditions, their histories, scriptures, creeds and worldviews side by side for comparison.

My feeling is that courses in comparative religion could and should be taught, not only in congregations of all

is the goal, wider reading and experience is necessary, beginning with encounters in diverse congregational environments. Driven by genuine curiosity and love of learning, first-hand experiences in new sanctuaries and services, meeting new believers, opens the way for wider understanding and insight.

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faiths, but in secular settings including public schools. A tricky prospect, I agree, but worthwhile if instructors are well-trained.

Yet there's the rub. Who is prepared to teach religion from a balanced cultural perspective? If qualified teachers can't be found to provide a nonsectarian approach to comparative religion (or "Bible as literature"), I don't see how these can be competently taught.

Obviously the second "C" only works in non-fear-based settings. When a group is fearful of being challenged by new ideas and beliefs (the god-segregators), comparative study and discussion is unwelcome. In other words, those whose faith has already "won" are probably not going to engage in any serious comparisons of the "losers."

Without some knowledge of other traditions we have no foundation for appreciation or actual dialogue. If wisdom

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The third "C" is based on commonalities — common concerns handled with common sense. It's ultimately about cooperation, plain and simple.

Does belief still matter? It certainly might. Is it an obstacle to relationships or collaborative action? It doesn't have to be.

While I managed cooperative housing for independent seniors, our "ecumenical" board was composed of women and men who were members of local congregations and some who had no affiliation. There were residents who participated in nearby faith communities and those who did not. None of that

mattered. Collaborative leadership and cooperation in the household is what mattered.

This is the way cooperative religion works. It is about "what works." It is grounded and centered in a "learning community" that may be composed of a wide diversity of experiences and opinions. In a real sense, beliefs take a back-seat to building a better household, neighborhood, community, country, world.

Rabbi Heschel warns us not to forget that the "true sanctuary has no walls." A surprising image coming from a person of faith. But when we consider the title of his book, "God in Search of Man," we see that he's flipping the narrative, expanding the definition of sanctuary and maybe the definition of God.

If humans spend their lives seeking the "spiritual" in big boxes of belief, they may have to rethink their sense of sanctuary as a limited space — protecting restricted beliefs — that can never hold the Limitless.

Secular people aren't waiting outside the walls for the competitions and comparisons to play out. They're ready for fewer barriers and more cooperation.

Once we decide to progress along the path of the "Three C's," growing more accustomed to cooperative relationships, a "sanctuary without walls" may become a shared, welcoming space, religion or no religion.

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