

Turkiye and the Three-way Mirror

By Janis Williams (Austin, Texas)



My husband San and I, along with six travel partners and two Turkish-American guides, have just returned home from ten days in Turkey as guests of the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue, or I.I.D. People who have visited the breathtaking ruins at Ephesus, who have stepped inside one of the cone-shaped mud houses of Harran, or gaped in wonder at the ancient Hittites' homes carved out of other-worldly geologic formations at Cappadocia—all such people

will understand the awe we visitors felt in that unique area of the world where civilization was born.

There was so much to see, smell, taste, and experience that we needed a movie camera, or the widest of wide angle lenses, to take it all in.

Yet rather than trying to recreate the trip in its stunning variety, I'd like to bring the focus in closer. This visit prompted me to look inward, even as I was taking in breathtaking sights. Self-examination became both central to, and pervasive in, my time in that exotic country. Because the U.S. and Turkish cultures are so unlike each other, I couldn't avoid seeing the contrasts. In particular I saw the Christian faith, my own, as compared with that of the Muslims I came to know in Turkey.

“You honor us with your presence,” said our host at dinner one night. We were sitting at tables on the front porch of the family's summer house, gazing at the Aegean Sea only yards away. “We bless one another through our sharing together,” he finished in his broken English, and then he asked permission to return to his native language. The rest of his message came through a translator, but it was easy to see that he was speaking from the heart. He told us that showing hospitality is an essential part of Islam, but that he had a deeper reason for his gratitude at our coming. “I think peace will come to the earth when people sit down in conversation,” he said simply. “It starts here, at the table.”

Although we come from different faith traditions, I believe that dinner was a religious experience for all of us. I'm talking about something more than simply being moved by a stranger's kindness. Interfaith dialogue involves learning about another faith while also holding a mirror up to one's own.

Being a good person is so important in Islam. To be a devout Muslim, one has to practice piety, and that means certain concretely fixed actions must be taken, specific beliefs held. There is no god but Allah. Pray five times a day. Give alms and service to others. Fast during Ramadan. Make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Other things are clearly forbidden: alcohol, food (especially meat) that is not prepared according to Islamic law, paying or receiving interest. To practice and believe these specifics is to be a Muslim.

What in Christianity is strictly forbidden? In Islam, prayer is a fixed ritual. When does a Christian pray? How does Christian piety differ from that of Islam? Good works and hospitality bring the reward of the hereafter to a Muslim. In Christianity, such acts are a response to the idea that God has already come to us and brought us grace. The reason dialogue is so worthwhile is that the goal of each religion is peace—with God and our neighbors. Dialogue helps us move ourselves and the world toward that goal.

Finally, a word about the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue, a loosely organized group of moderate Muslim businesspeople who sponsor (that is, pay for) small groups of Westerners to visit Turkey. What the Turks ask in return is that, alternating with visiting marvelous historical sites, the Americans hold conversations with Muslims. If hospitality is a way of furthering peace, it can't come too soon. Yesterday, only days after we returned from Turkey, a group of gunmen attacked the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul, killing three Turkish police officers. The assailants were also killed. What kind of hatred and misunderstanding led to this attack? And how can peace-loving people counteract it?

Our guide gave us a Turkish word for a good first step: *hoşgörü*, which he translated as "seeing the beauty, and overlooking the fault, in the other."