

**Marty Kaplan, Contributor**

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director

The Trouble With Trump's Tolerance Tour

One thing inadvertently equips Trump to reconcile the professions of unique truthfulness by incompatible religions: his utter indifference to the truth.

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Post-truth POTUS turns out to be perfect casting for tackling the One True Religion problem.

Even if it were someone else, not Donald Trump, pulling the planet's attention to the world's three Abrahamic religions; if it were Barack Obama or George W. Bush, say, or even Eleanor Roosevelt, making an ecumenical pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, Israel and Vatican City, the trouble with tolerance would still be a burr under the interfaith saddle.



Pluralism is the euphemism for how we manage the mess made when the worshippers of different gods maintain that theirs is the One and only God, and when sectarian worshippers of the same God claim that their way of worship is the one and only Way.

We contend with this dilemma, as we do with other discomfiting realities, like earthquakes, mortality and incipient male-pattern baldness, by denying it. Pluralism whistles past the graveyard of religious persecutions, inquisitions, pogroms, coerced conversions, civil wars, crusades and genocide. Instead of dealing forthrightly with doctrinal warfare, we acclaim mutual respect a common value, and we declare religious diversity a feature of civilization, not a bug that's infested human history.

As for the varieties of irreligious experience, contemporary pluralism treats nonbelievers as all in the family. Diversity extends the same welcome to atheists and agnostics that it does to everyone else. Ditto for anyone who identifies as spiritual but not religious. God is great; God is dead; God is nature; God's a metaphor; God is you; God is me; God's a mystery; God is now: Pluralism wraps its arms around interpretations like those with no less graciousness than it affords to God is Yahweh, God is Christ, God is Allah.

That message is beautiful, incoherent and very American. It's the least bad answer to the tension between religions and democracy. It's what we want our culture to depict and our politics to project – a supremely inclusive message to a world of warring faiths.

Saudi Arabia, whose Wahhabi Salafists finance Sunni warfare on Shia Muslims, is an ironic choice for President Trump to declare that his visit to “many of the holiest places in the three Abrahamic faiths” was a journey in the spirit of “tolerance and respect for followers of all faiths.” Trump himself is an improbable carrier of that message. He is the candidate who said, “I think Islam hates us”; who ran on a Muslim ban; whose simulation of Christian piety was a transparent hustle for the evangelical vote. The only One he worships is himself. Hypocrisy scarcely begins to describe his speechwriters' paeon to our kinship as children of Abraham; gall, cynicism and arrogance come to mind as well.

But one thing inadvertently equips Trump to reconcile the professions of unique truthfulness by incompatible religions: his utter indifference to the truth. Trump wouldn't recognize a contradiction if it bit him on the butt. A fact isn't a fact to him; it's just a gambit, an alternative to consider. “Believe me” means “true”; “false” means “true”; “fake” means mean. Welcome to the epistemological fun house. Have a tremendous day.

If nothing is truly true, then there's nothing to crown as the one true religion. Tolerance treats every belief as equally valid; Trump treats every belief as equally meaningless. Pluralism ties itself into pretzels trying

to accommodate conflicting prophets and reconcile competing prophecies. But if prophecies are just fake news, interfaith dialogue is interfake dialogue, and the ultimate consequence of ultimate tolerance – hey, anything goes – isn't a catastrophe, it's Access Hollywood.

There's a kernel of self-deception at the core of pluralism: For the sake of peaceful co-existence, we con ourselves into thinking that the truths that matter most to us don't much matter at all. Trump, con to his core, flips that: Thinking that anything matters is the mark of a mark. Doctrine is for dummies; nihilism is bliss. Kumbaya, folks.

To solve the pluralism puzzle, there's an alternative to Trump's know-nothingism that appeals to me. Ken Wilber, whose work synthesizes wisdom traditions, calls it the search for the greatest common denominators, for the highest common factors, across all theologies and thought systems. For instance, the golden rule, do unto others, Kant's categorical imperative, John Rawls' veil of ignorance: whatever you call it, acting from that principle is what so many religions and moral philosophies exhort us to do, irrespective of their Gods or stories or paradigms. Instead of merely tolerating one another's differences, we can actively discover ourselves in each other's mirrors.

The Abraham narrative, which comes to me from the Hebrew Bible, has always troubled me. I know there's commentary that makes it less fearsome than I find it, but I'm stuck in its literal meaning. When God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, it strikes me as a cruel test of Abraham's absolute obedience – and a warning that any failure of mine to obey the letter of God's laws could be fatal.

I'm not comforted that I share this origin story with the other Abrahamic religions. It makes me wonder if fundamentalism – fanaticism – is what we really have in common. I'd rather connect with my spiritual cousins through Adam. His story puts the knowledge of good and evil in human hands. That got him exiled from the garden. But no one turned life after Eden into life after truth.

This is a crosspost of my column for the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.