



## Religious Plurality and Polarization

Published: Saturday, July 09, 2011, 2:17 PM



By **Guest Columnist**

**By Frank Fromherz**

Notions of "the sacred" affect public life. The challenge of divergent views will only grow in our own region as the Pacific Northwest religious landscape continues to change.



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How we deal with this may reveal something about our personal character as well as our public spirit, whether we are open to seeking common ground or, instead, hold defiantly fast to our interpretation of the divine, overwhelming the public square with stridency. A world fraught with religious extremism (or anti-religious ideological fanaticism, for that matter) and its explosive consequences need not be the outcome. If we want greater justice and peace in the world and in our region we best think about this.

What have been your own personal encounters with conceptions of the sacred different from what you grew up with? I have been asking myself this question.

A couple of weeks ago on a trip to the Oregon coast, as my wife and I drove down Highway 101 into Yachats we noticed a man, contemplative in appearance and dressed in burgundy robes, walking alongside the road. Several Tibetan monks, who due to severe repression of religious freedom in China have lived for decades exiled in India, had come for a short stay in this small coastal community. Buddhist monks would be leading a ritual at the Commons that evening, we soon learned, so we joined a large "congregation" of Yachats residents for what turned out to be an empowering meditation.

Camped overnight at lush and verdant Cape Perpetua and sitting quietly by the fire, I thought about how so much has changed since the mid-1950s when I was a toddler here in western Oregon. Religions (and to be sure, worldviews skeptical of organized religion) from all over the world have become vibrant presences not only in our large cities but even in our small towns. Diverse "paths to the sacred" are like the flora and fauna of a coastal rainforest, fascinating to behold even though we may be ignorant of so much going on in the sylvan setting--in the ancient, modern and "post-modern" forest of spiritualities, and especially in this age of the rapid religious globalization of social life.

Thoughts about religion, in Yachats, take me back in time even as they confront me with a new world. My maternal grandparents had retired there and in those years they loved to host their grandkids. Each night "Gramps" made his way through 15 decades of a Catholic rosary. He prayed devoutly, standing, arms outstretched as if on a cross, moving through rosary beads and through a story -- a passion narrative he knew as the "joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries" of his faith.

In that same era the sociologist Will Herberg's famous book on American religion, "Protestant -- Catholic -- Jew," was published. Though a serious study it was not a full picture of the nation's religious character even then, and today with the markedly increased religious diversification of our society the book hardly represents the rainbow of doctrines and rituals. We are surely becoming a global village now, and the question is, how do we feel about this?

Helping us through our most precious life moments of bereavement and celebration, and pointing toward what we believe to be transcendent and supernatural (or, in alternate outlooks, immanent, natural, and sacred), religions can inspire social solidarity and promote social change. But, in distorted manifestations, they can become cauldrons of enmity and violence -- and they can be manipulated for unjust political ends.

Creeds, when linked to morality and social policy in our own society, too often appear to enshrine fault lines -- for instance, death with dignity vs. immoral suicide, faith healing vs. responsible parenting, reproductive rights vs. pro-life "operation rescues," the defense of traditional marriage vs. the basic rights to marriage of committed partners, to name just some of the polarizing issues influenced by religious passions.

Can we temper intense convictions with recognition of our common humanity and can we seek common ground? In Yachats we watched Buddhist monks patiently creating an elaborate, brilliantly colored sand mandala. A few days later, down by the Pacific they dissolved it. The sand and their own creative work of art were given back to nature. An appreciation for the ultimate impermanence of human creations -- including our sometimes defensive or fanatical systems of belief -- is what remained. Yet even this perspective on ephemerality is brought forth into our own time by an historic tradition of reverence for the sacred. So there is distinctive wisdom to be honored in the whole range of religious diversity. This too remains.

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