- Dialogue with respect and don’t use an overpowering “persuasive” style.
- Spend more time listening and get to know the other person.
- It should be clear that no one enters a dialogue as some kind of blank slate. Everyone has a faith that they live by, and any dialogue starts with a position, not floating free in the air. Dialogue recognizes that each person treasures and values the position he or she has come to, and takes place in a context of people with beliefs — beliefs that help them shape their lives within the world as they find it.
- Don’t use your dialogue as a "back door" to changing or watering down someone else’s faith, it should also be obvious that those who enter into open, respectful dialogue can expect to have their ideas challenged and their eyes opened to new ways of seeing.
- Our set ideas can be challenged fruitfully and positively by dialogue partners who have perspectives that are alien to us. Change is not necessarily threat or unfaithfulness. Indeed, openness to change can show us the way out of what may appear to be a dead end.
- Dialogue is important for us as a way to gain skills we need in our own lives.

Column: Religion provides life's foundation

Posted: Friday, April 10, 2009 12:00 am

Column: Religion provides life's foundation **Sedki Riad, guest columnist | 0 comments**

Religion is a topic that can bring people close to form unusually strong bonds and could, as well, result in hatred and animosity beyond limits. So, writing this column is like stepping into a minefield... With that in mind, let me "step in."

Looking at the greatness of the universe around us and the precision in which it functions as well as the magnificence of the human machine and brilliance of its unique functionalities and skills is a sign for me that this vast system is not an accident or a fairytale story. It is much more serious than we can ever imagine.

I believe I am here on this earth for a serious function. This universe did not just "happen" and my role as a human is not a trivial one. To me, this is where religion comes in, providing a base to relate to "the purpose of life and our purpose in life."

So, what can I tell you about religion that you don't already know? Isn't it amazing that when it comes to religion, we are all scholars? Even those who make the claim that they don't have a religion or are not religious have a religion and are religious. The fact is that each one of us believes in a system of "values" that influences his or her own life.

In searching published definitions of religion, I came across "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor (vigor/zeal) and faith," and "a pursuit or interest followed with devotion." The term comes from the Latin word for religion, which means obligation or reverence. Searching my mother tongue of Arabic, the word is "deen" with the root word of "dana" which means, (guess what?) debt and obligation and commitment.

Hence religion implies obligations - call it worship, call it belief, call it commitment - it is an obligation where we commit ourselves to something, someone, some entity, some ideology, that we end up enslaved to, driven by, or overwhelmed with. It is what we choose to

submit to and follow "religiously."

Thus, we all have religions and we are all religious, and each one of us has his or her own custom or customized religion. Some of us claim that they did not customize their religions but rather have the original equipment manufacturer (as in parts for your car built by the original dealer, not generics) religion. However, the majority can't deny that they deviate to some extent from the brand they label themselves with.

So, it looks like religion is an inseparable component of our lives. It influences how we live our lives and how we conduct ourselves - 24/7 you are who you are and you are your religion, customized, or custom made; and there is no way we can ignore the role our religions play in our relationships with each other, with other creations, and with the environment around us.

Now, back to "the purpose of life and our purpose in life." I believe these two related questions are (or should be) the biggest challenge for us humans. Trivializing this investigation is escaping reality and burying one's head in the sand. Those among us who take this question seriously are in constant search for the truth. With our finite, yet "infinitesimal" knowledge, we are but a tiny product that will never comprehend its grand and majestic maker. However, we continue the search, some more diligently than others. Some would suffice with popular answers and some would dig deeper than others.

Back to me again - the greatness of the universe around us and the magnificence of the human machine are signs for me that there is a creator or maker who has made everything with built-in features that would enable it to function according to specs (designer's specifications). A creator who is unlimited in wisdom and unlimited in power and has the complete knowledge, who has perfected his creation and loves every part of it, and who is in charge and is constantly maintaining and caring of his universe. A creator who has entrusted us humans with uniqueness in our ability to choose, to think, to love, to enjoy life, and to be able to balance all that. A creator to whom I am accountable for what I was entrusted with. A creator who deserves for me to constantly recognize and seek. Only through this creator would I be able to relate to "the purpose of life and my purpose in life."

For me as human being, I was born with a basic nature/instinct (my original OEM) that was influenced by the parents who raised me, the society I lived in and the many experiences I have gone through. That is how we get customized. Some would reach a point in their lives where they go through a major overhaul (not necessarily positive) and change all or most of the OEM parts, ignore the manufacturer, the manufacturer specs and all the warning labels, and replace it with custom parts. That is not me, I hope.

VIRGINIA

THE ROANOKE TIMES FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2006



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What's on Your Mind?

Jihads today are difficult to define

Q: What do Hamas, Hezbollah and jihad mean?
— Jack Hawkins, Blacksburg

A: Shortly after 9/11 we learned that radical Islamists were responsible for the attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people.



Tom Angleberger

Five years later, we've seen more attacks, more violence in the Middle East and the coining of the term "Islamo-fascists" to describe the terrorists.

But, after five years, most of us have made little progress in understanding Islam — a religion practiced by neighbors and colleagues who live peacefully beside us here in the U.S.

To find answers, I started with a standard reference book and checked on the official U.S. government stance. Then I sought further information from the Islamic Center of Blacksburg.

Some readers may find that the answers lead to more questions. Others may find themselves agreeing or disagreeing with the answers. I hope you will send me your comments and questions after reading the column.

According to the Columbia Encyclopedia, Hamas means "zeal" and Hezbollah is the "party of God." Both of these are political groups — Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon — which the U.S. State Department classifies as terrorist organizations because of their roles in Middle East violence.

"Jihad" is similarly complicated. It is often translated as "holy war," but there's a lot more to it than that.

Holy war "is both a mistranslation and an oversimplification," Sedki Riad told me in a detailed e-mail. Riad, a Virginia Tech professor, is also administrative director of the Islamic Center of Blacksburg.

One reason he objects to the term "holy war" is that he thinks it suggests an attempt to spread Islam by force. That goes against one of the tenets of Islam, that "the freedom of belief is a God-Given-Right."

But no one can deny that the word jihad is, today, closely linked with the violent struggle in the Middle East.

Among the terrorist-linked groups using the term are Hezbollah, which is sometimes called "Islamic Jihad," Al Jihad and Islamic Jihad of Palestine, according to the State Department.

While jihad does call for Muslims to fight for the rights of all people, Riad noted that it also demands that violence be a last resort.

"It is an Islamic religious duty to defend and protect God-given rights with vigor and commitment, be it the rights of Muslims or non-Muslims," he wrote.

"Peaceful means are to be exhausted before resorting to the use of force."

He also listed rules Muslims must follow when force is required. These include prohibitions against killing

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WOYM: Jihads can be personal struggles

FROM 1

women and children or destroying farms and factories.

Although I'm no expert on the Middle East, it seems clear to me that these rules are being broken on a regular basis.

"Islam gives the Muslim the highest code of ethics to abide by," Riad wrote. "But when the pressure and injustice exceed human tolerance and withstanding, human beings (Muslims or non-Muslims) break down and are tempted to revolt and respond violently.

"You can't demand ideal behavior from human beings living under oppressive regimes and unjust tyrannies," he wrote. "You can't defend their wrong actions, too."

How does 9/11 fit into all this, I asked.

Riad said he is careful not to judge any individuals, but this is how he judges the act itself:

"The atrocities that were committed on Sept. 11 are not befitting to Islam in any way."

Personal struggle

So far we've focused on the violent side of jihad, but there's more to it than fighting.

While the Columbia Encyclopedia sometimes uses the "holy war" translation, its section on Islam calls jihad, "the exertion of efforts for the cause of God."

Jihad can even refer to one's "personal struggle to be righteous."

Riad explained how this works on an everyday basis.

"I do jihad against my own temptations [in order] to implement righteousness in my own lifestyle (physically and spiritually). When I resist eating that delicious ice cream cone to control my own weight I am doing jihad, and when I persist to be constant in my prayers I am also doing jihad.

"I do jihad when I speak for what is right and when I speak against what is wrong. I am doing jihad right now as I answer your questions and am trying my best to be accurate and informative."

Correction: Last week, I misidentified biologist Donald Linzey. Linzey, who answered a question about rabies for us, is a professor at Wytheville Community College.

Got a question? Got an answer? Call Tom Angleberger at 777-6476 or send an e-mail to tomangleberger@yahoo.com. Don't forget to provide your full name, its proper spelling and your hometown.

Look for Tom Angleberger's column on Fridays.