

Common sacred ground



By Nate Smelle

IN RESPONSE TO JANE FREYMOND'S Letter to the Editor *Re: God is Great?* in last week's edition of *Bancroft This Week*. I would like to thank her for writing this letter, and for inspiring me to take another look at different ways in which the words I use may be misinterpreted.

Freymond claims that the editorial *God is Great?* (*Bancroft This Week*, pg.4, Jan. 16, 2014) distracted from the horrific acts of destruction which took place in Paris and Yemen earlier this month. Looking over the piece again and again I still do not understand how she came to this conclusion.

I agree with her that we should not paint all religions with the same brush, however, I disagree with her that bringing religion into this debate distracts us from the horrific reality of these events. The reality is that when the attackers in Paris shouted the words 'God is great!' they brought religion into the debate. Furthermore, establishing a peaceful common ground among the world's religions should not be perceived as a bad thing. Is it not better for us to nurture religious harmony through open public discourse, rather than to suppress it with fear, anger, pain and silence.

When I suggested that practitioners of all religions ought to begin their personal spiritual journey by first asking questions I meant it with the greatest sincerity. The string of questions that began with 'Would the God you believe in justify the killing of someone who believes in a different God?', and ended with 'Isn't the essence of all religion unconditional love?' were not pointed at any one religion. The reason I asked these questions was not to discriminate between one religion and another; neither were they intended to imply that a greater truth resides in a specific religion. In fact, I believe the greatest truth we can know as human beings resides at the heart of all the world's religions.

This universal truth I believe to be the recognition of an all-encompassing power that unconditionally bestows love, energy and breath upon all living things. In Hinduism and Buddhism this truth is represented by the Sanskrit word *Bhakti*; in Christianity it is known as *Agape*; in Daoism it is said that, 'The Great Dao flows everywhere. All things depend on it for life, and it does not turn away from them.' Every religion shares this common sacred ground we call earth. All faiths have arisen from the same soil, from the same water and the same air. Whatever we decide to name this all-encompassing power that animates life around the globe we need to recognize that it is the same energy or entity whatever you want to call it that gives us this gift of existence. Intolerance of

others beliefs is what caused this senseless bloodshed in the first place. Intolerance, ignorance and greed, that is.

A truly healthy global society must possess the widest diversity of spiritual understandings and religions. For this to be possible believers of all faiths must always treat one another with kindness, compassion and respect. Anything less in interfaith communication should be seen as mutually dishonourable and a disservice to the health and welfare of all.

Growing up in St. Catharines I attended St. Theresa's Catholic School. This is where I first discovered the concept of God. Coming home one day after class in Grade 1 I asked my parents why Jesus was nailed to the cross. 'Couldn't his Dad stop the bad guys?' I probed them further.

I remember the look that came over their faces - which was similar to the look they gave when I asked about the birds and the bees years later - as they thought of how to answer. To the best of my memory this is what they told me: 'Look at the Bible as a book that teaches you how to be a better person.' 'Is the Bible true?' I asked. 'That is for you to decide,' they responded. Although my parents are not Catholic or religious at all for that matter, they are spiritual people. Lucky for me they were wise enough to see the value in all religions, and share that value with me. Those who kill in the name of God or religion do not share this sense value. They also do not understand that we all share in common our sacred ground.