



THREE WISE WOMEN

Three spiritual leaders representing the “religions of the book” — Christianity, Islam and Judaism— break barriers and share their hopes and prayers for this holiday season.

by Mickey Goodman photography by Daemon Baizan

Ever since the year A.D. 50 when Priscilla and her husband Aquila shared equally in the preaching of the gospel (Acts 18:2-26; Corinthians 16:19, etc.), women have aspired to the pulpit. Few faiths, however, allowed women to be ordained, until the 20th century. And though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 cleared the way for equality in the work force, that piece of federal legislation effectively blocked a woman’s path to the pulpit by exempting religious institutions. In spite of these obstacles, the 2001 edition of Statistical Abstracts of the United States reports that the percentage of women in the clergy swelled from five percent in 1983 to nearly 15 percent in 2000. Three of those women – Rev. Susan Triplett, Rabbi Julie Schwartz and Safiyyah Shahid – bring unique gifts to their respective faiths and share a common message.

“Women are especially suited to deliver the holiday message,” says Rev. Susan Triplett, associate pastor of congregational care at the North Avenue

Presbyterian Church in Midtown [Atlanta]. “Men see themselves as problem solvers and get only as much information as they need at the time,” she says. “Women are open-ended and know things can’t be fixed overnight,” a trait especially important in the ministry. Because they are raised to be good nurturers, women are truly giving of themselves and their goods. Yet Triplett feels gift giving is the last thing on God’s mind. “We can bless people more by sitting down, listening and paying attention. IT all boils down to our relationship with [people], with God, with ourselves,” she says.

Triplett’s message to her congregants is to set aside the importance of presents during the Christmas season and focus on the talents God has given them. “Use those gifts to help others. When you are helping and giving in a way that fits you, it becomes a joy,” she says. Instead of putting out “good deed calls”, Triplett looks for people who are particularly well-suited for a task. Recently, she asked a nurturing 70-year-old woman to lead some women in a study group. “Her gift to them will be priceless.”

Rabbi Julie Schwartz, associate rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in Dunwoody, says her idea of the male vs. female rabbinical message has changed during her 17 years in the pulpit. She feels people tend to oversimplify and assume that the male message is one of power and strength; the female, more nurturing. “In the beginning, I felt there was no difference between the messages of male and female rabbis. In the middle years, I realized we were very different. Now I think there’s a male spin and a female spin. I give [a combination of] both. I believe people begin listening to my words as those of a female rabbi. By the end, I hope they hear the words of a rabbi.”

The practice of gift giving during Hanukkah has historical perspective, but the focus should be more on “adding light to the world,” says Schwartz. “[Since Sept. 11] people use words about prayers and praying with less trepidation. They’re more willing to share their spiritual side. All the issues about Americans coming to understand what Islam is all about are important. People knew nothing before. Now they are asking about Muslims and Jews and others. Maybe we know and understand a little more [today].”

To foster understanding, volunteers from Temple Emanu-El have joined forces with other faiths to build on of Atlanta’s first ecumenical Habitat for Humanity houses. “My hopes and prayers are that all of us can celebrate [the season] in proper spirit and gather strength from relationships with one another.”

Though only males lead Muslims in the daily calls to prayer, Safiyyah Shahid, principal of the W.D. Mohammed High School in southeast Atlanta, recognizes that as principal of a religious school she is a spiritual leader to her students. “It’s difficult to separate the education from the religion,” she says. “I feel like I bridge the gap.” During Ramadan, a month-long fast [from sunrise, beginning in early November] and time of purification, Muslim children are not permitted to eat

during the normal school lunch hour. Instead they often spend quiet time reading the required one-thirtieth of the Qur'an (Koran) each day for 30 days.

“Our mission at both Clara Mohammed Elementary and W.D. Mohammed is to develop enlightened global leaders. We are all one people despite [our] cultural differences,” she says. “To be effective in the world, we must respect one another’s points of view and open our minds to diverse people and new ideas. We are hopeful for a more peaceful world. Ramadan helps us create inner peace, which must happen first.” She feels women are more global and understanding in their approach – seeking long-term solutions instead of quick fixes – and thus they are more able to deliver this message.



Safiyyah Shahid, Rev, Susan Triplett and Rabbi Julie Schwartz

Like Christmas and Hanukkah, Ramadan also has a tradition of gift giving. “First we fast, then we celebrate during Eid-UI-Sitr, the three days following Ramadan,” she says. “We give gifts to our children, our friends, to one another. We also go out into the community.” Sometimes they take gift baskets to the hungry or visit senior citizens. Her hope for the season is that all people are judged on their merits. “I want to be seen as a person, a human being. Muslims shouldn’t be lumped in a single group. Our humanity should come through. Since Sept. 11 we must rethink how we see each other,” she says.

Although Christianity, Judaism and Islam appear very diverse they are frequently referred to together as the “religions of the book.” First mentioned in the Qur’an, that phrase has remained popular since the rise of Islam, says Dr. Laurie Patton, associate professor of religion and chair of the Department of Religion at Emory University. “Primarily, It is a way of emphasizing what kind of spirituality is

shared by all three traditions, a spirituality of reading, writing and thinking about God primarily through reflection on texts," she says.

This connection is never far from the minds of Triplett, Schwartz and Shahid during this season of light and peace. All echo prayers for faith in God and peace throughout the world. "We need something outside of ourselves that is perfect, powerful, wise and creative. The gifts from God are there," says Triplett. "Tis the season to pay attention to such things."

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