

The Virtues of Holy Envy

BY
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School of Family Life professors Dr. David Dollahite and Dr. Loren Marks recently authored *Strengths in Diverse Families of Faith*, which highlights how individuals live their religions in ways that strengthen their marriages and families. In writing the book, Dollahite and Marks interviewed 476 people in 198 families from eight different religious-ethnic groups. During the interviews, they began to appreciate and admire the different faiths of their subjects, leading them to develop a deep respect and “holy envy” for the practices of different faiths. Dollahite says that this is one of the book’s main themes.

Marks and Dollahite studied the following eight religious-ethnic groups:

- Asian Christian
- Black Christian
- Catholic and Orthodox Christian
- Evangelical Christian
- Jewish
- Latter-day Saint
- Mainline Christian
- Muslim

What Is “Holy Envy”?

Dollahite explains that “holy envy” is “what you feel when you hear about, observe, or participate in a religious practice of another faith and you find it so meaningful and delightful that you wish that your faith had a [similar] practice.” An example of holy envy from Marks and Dollahite’s book is the respect and admiration they have for the Islamic practices of Ramadan and zakat. During the celebration of Ramadan, Muslims fast for a month and pay zakat, a charitable offering of 2.5 percent of one’s wealth,

to alleviate suffering and poverty. In their book, the authors said, “If this level of generosity were practiced by all, . . . world hunger might be eradicated in short order. Indeed, the lived principle of zakat stimulates not only a sense of deep respect and holy envy, but also hope for a better world.”

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Inspires Holy Envy

The concept of holy envy is recognized widely by other faiths, but its origins have connections

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to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The term was used by the late Krister Stendahl, the former bishop of Stockholm for the Church of Sweden. Stendahl was serving in this position when many Swedish citizens were strongly opposing the building of the Stockholm Sweden Temple. While learning about the Church, Stendahl was impressed by the doctrine of vicarious baptisms for the dead. During this conflict, Stendahl held a press conference to address the negative perceptions of the Church. He shared his thoughts not only on the Church but on how everyone should interact with different faiths, saying, “Try to leave room for holy envy, or a deep appreciation of the good qualities of other faiths that you admire so much you might even wish they were a part of your own faith.”

Inspired by Holy Envy

In the last section of their book, Marks and Dollahite focus on the holy envy they gained through studying diverse faith groups. One of the practices they admired was the Jewish celebration of the Sabbath, or Shabbat. In a *Deseret News* article about Shabbat, Dollahite says, “One of the strengths of observant Jewish



DR. DAVID DOLLAHITE



DR. LOREN MARKS

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“Look for [other religions’] strengths and their virtues, and you will find strength and virtues that will be helpful in your own life.”

— PRESIDENT GORDON B. HINCKLEY

families is the way they strive to keep the Sabbath by making it a joyous holy day. Latter-day Saints can learn much from our Jewish friends about making the Sabbath a delight.”

Another point of holy envy for the authors was Catholic and Orthodox Christians’ practice of meaningful rituals. Marks and Dollahite explain that these rituals contain deep symbolic meanings, including a longing for unity with God, with one’s family, and with “sisters and brothers inside (and outside) the faith.” While the authors note that these Christian groups are aware that this unity can be difficult to achieve, they admit human mistakes by confessing either to a priest or to family members. Both authors conclude: “We find ourselves feeling respect and holy envy for the extensive and explicit efforts of Catholic and Orthodox Christian faiths as they strive to replace guilt with

hope, bitterness with forgiveness, divisiveness with unity, and animosity with atonement.”

By emphasizing holy envy, Dollahite and Marks hope to dispel falsehoods and foster respect between different faiths. Marks explains, “Holy envy helps to convert potential conflict and contention into mutual awareness, deep respect, and authentic admiration.” Dollahite agreed, adding, “Holy envy strengthens friendships, relationships, and communities. It can motivate people to work together with those of different faiths. It can heal wounds

caused by religious ignorance and misunderstanding.”

Developing Holy Envy

When asked how we can cultivate holy envy in our daily lives, the authors are happy to share a few ideas. Dollahite says that for many people, developing holy envy “is the result of a process of really getting to know a person of another faith or getting to know another faith well enough that you come to see how wonderful they are.” Marks adds that this process involves focusing on what we appreciate about another faith, not on what

we may find confusing. He says, “What is ennobling and elevating is to consciously attend to the admirable and beautiful aspects of a person. Holy envy is attending to the admirable and beautiful on a larger faith-oriented scale.”

Marks and Dollahite have experienced the blessings that come from developing holy envy and invite us to do the same. They believe that as individuals learn to celebrate other faiths, they also can become more committed to living their own. Marks explains that this permits “their faithful example to inspire you to a loftier level of living your own faith with beauty and integrity.” Dollahite suggests following President Hinckley’s advice from his biography *Go Forward with Faith*: “Look for [other religions’] strengths and their virtues, and you will find strength and virtues that will be helpful in your own life.”