



# EDITORS' PAGE

## Identity & Blindness

In the January 2005 issue, *Interreligious Insight* set out a guiding vision in the *Interreligious Insight Paradigm*. (<http://www.interreligiousinsight.org/January2005/Jan05Paradigm.html>). The Paradigm stressed that ours is an age of dramatic cultural evolution and that a major manifestation of the 21st-century values-shift is found in the "experience of religious pluralism that generates a dialogical understanding of religious truth."

But how do interreligious and intercultural ignorance, hostility, and even violence fit into the flow of cultural evolution? The answer lies in perceived threats to personal and cultural identity.

When a long-dominant complex of values and behaviors is suddenly challenged or even destroyed – as has happened in recent years in many troubled parts of the world – identity crisis is inevitable. All too often, a dangerous response emerges: self-definition over against the members of some other group. In the throes of the crisis of identity and the challenge to selfhood, I may choose to define myself in opposition to all that "the others" (Americans or Jews, or Serbs, or Muslims, or Christians, or blacks, or women, or liberals, etc.) seem to stand for. Group and individual identity crisis is the essential disturbance that gives rise to some of the most regressive and destructive phenomena of our time,

including intolerance, fundamentalism, ethnic cleansing, and most forms of religious violence.

Though modern thinkers debate the merits of religion, it has been the principal wellspring of meaning and source of identity for most of humankind throughout prehistory and history. It's quite clear, however, that religion as a cultural expression in the early 21st century is severely damaged. And the key to understanding that damage demands real insight into the destructive power of identity crisis. Let's consider a simple analogy.

Blue, red and green are the three primary colors of human light perception. The fovea of the eye, in the center of the retina, is packed with receptors called "cones", each able to respond to a particular wavelength, that is, to blue, red, or green light.

Imagine a world in which some people can perceive only blue light, others only red, and still others only green. In these circumstances, the inability to perceive "reality" as it might be illuminated to others will constitute a critical structure of identity. Those who perceive only blue will encounter their own uniquely accented world. For them, only those objects able to reflect blue light will stand out from the otherwise colorless (black) background. The "reds" and

the "greens" will have parallel but very different perceptual experiences.

Naturally, some insightful persons in each group will be open to the possibility that others' reports of very contrary perceptions are genuine. While most of those who respect the truth claims of the other "color groups" will likely still insist on the superiority of their own, some may begin to realize that multiple descriptions of the world can be uniquely valid. Many, however, will display a strong tendency toward complete denial of the authenticity of any but their own perceived reality. To embrace a "blue" view of the world is of course quite different from an insistence that "there is no green".

The power of this bit of imagery derives from the delightful fact that the confluence of the three primary colors of light – blue, red and green – yields pure white, the reunification of the spectrum.

At a time when so many Jews, Christians, and Muslims deny their shared heritage – insisting on separate and mutually exclusive identities, the tripartite character of human light perception provides an apt analogy. Monochromatic blindness corresponds to religious, ethnic, and cultural *exclusivism*, the ground of 20th- and 21st-century fundamentalism and violence in the name of religion.

The panchromatic intuition in the imaginary world resonates with cross-cultural encounter, dialogue, understanding and engagement in our own.

Theologian Ewert Cousins (see the October 2006 issue of *Insight*) and many others insist that ours is a "New Axial Period" – a cultural turning – that will shape the horizon of consciousness for future centuries. This extraordinary shift is increasingly apparent in the transition from *exclusivism* (complete denial of the truth of the other), toward *inclusivism* (acknowledgement of the possibility that the other's truth may be an acceptable, if partial, variant of one's own), toward *pluralism* (openness to the likelihood that rich religious truth may be found in many cultures and traditions). [Note: the "exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism" typology was originally developed by Alan Race, Editor-in-Chief of *Interreligious Insight*.]

There is ample reason to hope that the monochromatic blindness of identity-challenged religious and cultural exclusivism is beginning to yield to panchromatic vision. That hope lies in the spread of the global interreligious movement.

In a world filled with shadows, there's nothing like being able to absorb (and reflect) full-spectrum white light.

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