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Baptist students hear views from different world faiths

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Representatives of five world religions compared notes on God, evil and eternity in a panel discussion Jan. 29 at Houston Baptist University.

More than 250 students attended the three-hour World Religions Forum, sponsored by HBU's College of Arts and Humanities. Speakers addressed three questions: Who is God? Why is there evil and suffering in this life? What is the ultimate destiny of human life?

David Capes, chairman of HBU's Christianity department, moderated the program. The purpose of the event, he said, was to foster understanding -- "to listen and learn and try to understand."

Rabbi Stuart Federow, spiritual leader of Shaar Hashalom in Clear Lake City, Texas, represented the Jewish faith. He said the Hebrew Scriptures reveal a God who is one, indivisible, unique, without form, omnipotent and different from man.

"We are to love God, obey God, to be ever conscious about God and loyal to God," he said.

Duane Brooks, pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston, represented Christianity. He described God as one deity with three expressions in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

"We know that Jesus Christ is God not only because Scripture teaches that, but because Jesus uniquely claimed that," he said. Brooks said humans were made to have a relationship with God, and that relationship is possible through faith in Jesus.

Miao Hong, a nun from the Chung Mei Buddhist Temple in Stafford, on the other hand, said "God is everywhere" and may be found in every person. "In Buddhism, you could be the Buddha," she said. "I'm the Buddha."

Sri Gaurang Nanavaty, teacher at Chinmaya Mission Houston and a chemical engineer by profession, represented the Hindu faith. He described the deity as "Vishnu," meaning something that pervades all.

"He is residing in every heart," Nanavaty said, urging participants to look inside themselves to find God. "God is as far away from each one of us as the ocean is from the wave," he said. "There is no distance."

Mahmoud El-Gamal, professor of economics and statistics at Rice University, represented Islam. He identified God as "Allah" as revealed in the Koran and other teachings of the prophet Mohammed.

"Because God transcends time and space, we cannot ponder his essence," El-Gamal said. "But we can ponder his nature."

In written notes given to participants, El-Gamal explained Muslims believe God may be known through "introspection and reflection upon the world, as well as through revelation received by especially gifted men, commonly called prophets or messengers."

On the second question, about the source of evil and suffering, the panelists took a more diverse path.

"God creates both good and evil," said the rabbi. "To have it any other way is to have two gods."

He placed responsibility for choosing between good and evil squarely on humans themselves but rejected the notion of original sin, the Christian teaching that Adam and Eve brought the punishment of death into the world.

He acknowledged the existence of Satan, but not as an opposite of God. He compared Satan to a district attorney who works for God, the judge.

From the Christian perspective, evil exists because humanity has been given free will by God and chooses to sin, Brooks said. He identified Satan as the tempter and source of evil and suffering.

But God, he said, "is working all things together for good." And despite humanity's sin, "God chose to love us while we were at our worst."

From the Buddhist perspective, happiness or suffering is a matter of choice, Hong said. "You can create happiness. You can create suffering. ... The condition is how you look at it."

In Hindu belief, evil and suffering are the result of a person's own actions, Nanavaty said. "We have the freedom to change our lives." As a result, "we are not punished for our sins; we are punished by our sins," he said. "All the suffering is because of ignorance."

Islam teaches that all of life on Earth is a temporary test, El-Gamal said. There are tests both of affluence and suffering, he added.

All suffering ultimately comes from God, but it tends to manifest through the actions of humans, he said.

On the third question, about ultimate destiny, three of the panelists expressed belief in some kind of afterlife. The Buddhist spoke of reincarnation, and the Hindu identified no afterlife.

"On an individual level, it is the destiny of the human being to die," said the rabbi. "Judaism believes this world is not the end. There is punishment of the soul in the next life for the sins we commit in this life, and then the soul goes back to God."

This is true for all souls, he said, "except those that are inherently evil."

In the Christian perspective, "Christ will return to judge humankind and the world on the basis of whether we have accepted his mediation for sin," Brooks said.

This is a free gift of salvation made possible by God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the pastor said. "All of us may accept his gift."

Buddhists believe in reincarnation, Hong said, meaning the way a person lives as a human impacts what they will become in the next life. "You plant good seeds, you have a beautiful tree."

The ultimate destiny for Hindus is to be happy, to know identity with the creator, Nanavaty said. "Happiness is within me. ... Bliss ... is every individual's destiny."

Muslims see the next life as the main life, El-Gamal explained. The current life, which he called "transient," is "irrelevant" and merely a test to determine how the next life will be lived, he said.

God's judgment regarding the afterlife will be based on how a person has lived, El-Gamal said.

During a question-and-answer session, Brooks and El-Gamal were asked whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

El-Gamal responded that the Koran presupposes the Christian teaching on the Trinity as a belief that has "gone astray." While the Koran acknowledges Jesus as one of many messengers of God, Islam does not accept the statement of Jesus that he is himself God, El-Gamal said.

However, so long as Christians and Muslims focus on the teaching of God to do good and forbid evil, "We can live just fine, and as far as we're concerned, it's the same God."

Brooks responded that Christianity "clearly teaches that God is three in one," yet Christianity still is a monotheistic religion.

The one God reveals himself in three forms, Brooks said, drawing a comparison to water, which remains water in the form of a liquid, solid or gas.

"It is critical to Christianity that Jesus was not just a prophet but God in the flesh," he explained.

Another question asked Federow why Jews do not believe Jesus was the promised Messiah.

The rabbi said Christians and Jews define the term "messiah" differently. Jesus does not meet the true Jewish criteria for what the messiah is prophesied to be, he explained. "None of the things the messiah is to do have happened."

Further, he said, Christians should not project their non-Jewish understanding on Jewish expectations for the messiah. "It's our word. We define it."

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State Supreme Court accepts child-care worker's appeal

By Barbara Denman

COCOA, Fla. (ABP) -- Florida's Supreme Court has agreed to hear the case of a Baptist church day-care worker imprisoned in 1999 for child abuse.

Ann Barber, a former day-care worker at First Baptist Church of Cocoa, Fla., was convicted of one count of abuse after two children under her care were diagnosed with shaken-baby syndrome. A separate trial on charges stemming from the other incident has led to three mistrials.

Florida's high court has agreed to review a lower court's ruling that prosecutors can use her conviction in the first trial as evidence in the second. Barber's lawyers, meanwhile, are asking the Supreme Court to throw out that conviction, arguing that evidence from both cases was improperly used against her in the trial.

"Praise God," said Barber's husband, John. "We had been told by our attorneys that there was only a slim chance that the Supreme Court would take it. We have all been praying so hard and God has answered our prayers."

John Barber is associate pastor at First Baptist Church in Cocoa. Ann Barber worked at the church's day care until two children allegedly under her care were diagnosed with shaken-baby syndrome. While Barber claimed innocence, prosecutors convinced a jury that for both children to suffer similar injuries at the same time was too unlikely to be a coincidence.

John Barber still contends the medical evidence doesn't support the state's theory. He says his wife was convicted on "coincidence and not evidence."

Friends of the young mother of two have continued to protest her conviction and raise funds for her defense.

Since her conviction, medical experts have reviewed evidence used to convict Barber and testified that the injuries likely happened before the children were placed in her care.

Brevard County's prosecutor wants Barber to stand trial again on the pending case and use as evidence her conviction from the first trial. During one hearing, the judge ruled in Barber's favor, saying that medical evidence did not support the conviction and therefore could not be entered as evidence. The Fifth District Court overturned that ruling, however. Barber's lawyers are asking the Supreme Court to support the original ruling that the conviction cannot be used as evidence.

Barber's attorneys are also asking the Supreme Court to overturn her conviction, saying that her rights were violated when the judge allowed the evidence of the second child's injuries in the first trial. Under Florida law, details of a similar crime can be considered as evidence only after a hearing on the matter has been held to establish that the accused committed both crimes. No hearing was held in that first trial.

If her conviction is overturned, Barber could be put on trial again. Or the county could choose not to go through the expense of another trial.

The Supreme Court will hear oral arguments most likely in early summer. Barber's attorneys have prepared a legal brief for the justices to read. The prosecutors will submit their brief in response to the initial arguments. Then the defense will be given an opportunity for rebuttal. The court will review the documents, hear arguments and issue their decision in the case.

The court has no deadline to consider the case, but the Barber family is hopeful that a decision may be issued by late summer.

John Barber calls the past four years a "roller coaster of emotions."

"But once again we are all so excited and hopeful that this could be the thing that will turn Ann's case around," he said. "We are asking our friends to pray for us, the justices of the Supreme Court and our attorneys."

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Consultant says leaders can learn from animals

By David Winfrey

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- Church leaders could learn a thing or two from the animal world about how to be more productive, a management consultant said during the recent Shepherding the Shepherd conference.

Examples from nature model the message of "Gung Ho," a Chinese phrase meaning "working together" and the title of a book by Ken Blanchard about the same topic.

Ray Snyder, a consultant and speaker for Ken Blanchard Training, said any group must focus on teamwork because it is among the first things to suffer when any group gets busy.

"Guess what? It's a busy world, isn't it?" Snyder said.

Speaking to Kentucky Baptist pastors and their spouses, Snyder outlined the lessons of "Gung Ho":

-- The spirit of the squirrel. One of the reasons squirrels work so hard is because they are motivated to store food for the winter. Likewise, Snyder said, workers or church volunteers need to understand that their work has significance.

Significant work has three components Snyder said. First, workers know their efforts make the world a better place.

Second, everyone works toward a shared goal. Too often, churches have vague goals, such as wanting to grow or to be a friendly congregation. Snyder said every goal should be SMART, an acronym for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time bound. Time boundaries often are missing from goals, he added. "A goal without a deadline is a wish, a dream."

The third component of significant work is that values guide all plans, decisions and actions as team members focus on "moments of truth." Snyder defined a moment of truth as any moment when a customer or client has an opportunity to form an opinion about your organization. For a church, that can be visitors' first impressions when they attend church or the response they get when they call the church office.

"You need to manage every [moment of truth]," Snyder added, encouraging pastors to return home and decide what core values should guide their ministries.

-- The way of the beaver. Beavers work together, but each one decides how best to contribute toward a common goal, Snyder said. The lesson is that each worker should be allowed to determine how best to do his or her work. The role of management or church leaders is to make sure all the workers share the same values and goals and let the workers determine how to accomplish the work.

-- The gift of the goose. Geese honk to encourage each other, and workers need encouragement as well, Snyder said.

A vital ingredient for encouragement, Snyder noted, is knowing when to shut up. Managers have been taught to find something good to mention before offering instruction or criticism, he said.

As a result, workers who hear praise often ignore it, waiting for the other shoe to drop, Snyder said. "Don't follow the cheering with anything else."

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Gallup consultant tells pastors to build on their strengths

By David Winfrey

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- Every person has talent; the secret is discovering what it is and learning the best way to put it into action, according to a consultant with the Gallup Organization.

"We use the word 'talent' in a celebrity kind of way," said Dennis Hatfield, a former American Baptist pastor and now leadership consultant for Gallup. Hatfield was among the speakers at the Kentucky Baptist Convention's Shepherding the Shepherd conference for pastors.

"What Gallup believes, and what all of our research validates, is that every single human being is talented," he said.

Theologically speaking, "God shapes us with the talent he would have us to have as he sends us into the world," Hatfield said. "We lack nothing for the purpose to which Christ has called us."

Too often, however, businesses and churches try to recruit square pegs to do round-hole jobs. "If my talent doesn't make it go in this situation, it doesn't mean I'm not talented, second-class or inferior," Hatfield said. "It means I'm in the wrong darn place, and that can happen to anybody."

Leaders should be about the business of recruiting people with strengths that match the job and then helping them develop their talent even more, he said.

"Human beings get an intrinsic satisfaction from using our talents," Hatfield said. "What that means is, if you can see what a person's talent is and position them so that the outcome you want fits with their talent, you don't have to make them do it. You don't have to police them."

Organizations, including churches, should realize that no single leader has every strength, he added. "Almost no one sees both the forest and every individual tree."

Hatfield encouraged pastors to quit focusing on their weaknesses and start building on their strengths. "Your best way to lead is your best way to lead. If God wanted you to be Moses, you would have been, and you'd be really old right now."

He noted that society puts pressure on people to improve areas of weakness. "Gallup sees that essentially as a waste of time. We talk about managing weaknesses, which basically means if you find the sand in the foundation of your life, don't build the tower there. Let someone else do the things you're not good at."

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