

Spirituality Can Transcend Religion

Mazatlan is the home to a beautiful cathedral with vaulted ceilings, stained glass murals, ornate carvings, and gold and silver ornaments. This awe-inspiring structure has a unique feature – the Star of David is engraved in the windows of one of its wings. The story of how this Jewish symbol became associated with a religion that has been historically anti-Jewish is inspiring.

During the 19th century the Roman Catholic Church taxed the Mexican population heavily to build its many cathedrals in the country. In 1894 the government took away the church's power of taxation forcing it to rely on voluntary donations. The impoverished Mexicans failed to donate to the amount they had been taxed and new cathedral construction was halted. For two years the cathedral at Mazatlan sat partially finished and empty.

Mazatlan was a seaport and home to a large international community that based its wealth on trade. It was vying with Culiacan to be the capital of Sinaloa province, and a partially completed edifice would not enhance its position. The local Jewish community donated the money to complete the cathedral. It is probably no coincidence that Mazatlan escaped the escalation of anti-Jewish propaganda that led to the holocaust in Europe.

The psychology of building these massive cathedrals in the midst of 19th century poverty is clear: The Mexican peasant entering these beautiful structures would have the emotional feeling that their truly is something greater than themselves and that something is associated with the Roman Catholic church. Unfortunately that same church characterized the Jews as “Christ-killers” in its teachings and this made it easy for large numbers of Christians to believe that the Jews, as agents of Satan, were responsible for all-manner of modern day wrongs. But the Mazatlan Jews offered to financially support the Roman Catholic Church, and this offer was accepted and publicly acknowledged. The local Mexicans in Mazatlan could not be convinced that these same Jews were somehow responsible for their poverty.

A danger of religion is that it may divide people into “believers” and “non-believers” and that non-believers are, in some ways, on the side of evil. Counselling psychology is based on the notion that all people are essentially good and that we share a common humanity that transcends religious and political differences. Bad things are most often done when the other is dehumanized in some way, so that they are seen as evil or that their feelings do not count. We can guard against this by seeking out others who have different worldviews and learning to understand them. Whatever our beliefs about religion, it is important to broaden our spirituality to include the idea that all people are essentially good, and that it is valuable to cherish our diversity.