

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Engaging in pluralism without losing principles

Note: This column is coordinated by Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

By Frans van Liere

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Last month, Calvin College hosted "Principled Pluralism: Navigating America's Increasingly Diverse Religious Landscape," a panel discussion on religious pluralism on college campuses. Joseph DeMott moderated a discussion among Calvin President Michael LeRoy, Calvin Theological Seminary President Jul Medenblik and Alec Hill, the president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

The panel discussion was sponsored by the Aspen Institute and GVSU's Kaufman Interfaith



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a forum that includes Calvin College and several West Michigan institutions of higher learning. In the past, the consortium has hosted a variety of Christian, Jewish and Muslim speakers in daylong conferences on interreligious dialogue. The next conference in this series will be hosted by Cornerstone University on Oct. 14.

It might seem ironic to hold a panel on religious diversity on college campuses that features only Christian speakers on a

Institute, at the initiative of the latter's founder, Sylvia Kaufman. Kaufman also is the driving force behind the West Michigan Academic Consortium,

Christian campus. However, as President LeRoy pointed out in the panel discussion, being in a consciously Christian learning environment does not mean shutting oneself off from religious diversity or even interreligious dialogue; Calvin offers a Christian education that engages the world, not one that separates itself from it.

BARRIERS TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

My own research and teaching experience as a professor of history have helped me to appreciate interreligious dialogue as an essential part of a liberal arts education. Yet, it is a problematic concept for many Christians. Some are suspicious of it. They fear either "watering down" one's truth statements, or syncretism, the fusing together of different

beliefs and practices. Instead of engaging in interreligious dialogue, these Christians say, we should be a testifying to the truth of Christ's Gospel.

These fears are understandable, but they should not be barriers to interreligious dialogue. Engaging in interreligious dialogue need not mean giving up one's own deepest-held religious convictions. Quite the contrary. Most who do take part in sustained discussions with believers from other faiths report being spiritually nourished and enriched through the encounter, and gaining a better appreciation of one's own beliefs and traditions.

Syncretism might also be a red herring. Christians sometimes see the specter of syncretism in places where we need not fear it, while we ignore it in

places where it is much more prominent and pernicious. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against religious syncretism only once. He said, "You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:24). Here is a form of syncretism we should be much more worried about, yet many Christians are completely blind to it. Sometimes, it takes skill to identify the idols of one's own age.

Christians are called to share our faith with others, but there are different ways to do that in different contexts. Engaging in a dialogue in a spirit of humility and charity might be a more effective way of testifying to the love of Christ. I am glad Calvin and Calvin Seminary's presidents modeled this kind of Christian behavior.

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