

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Dialogue faces challenges on the right and left

By Fred Stella

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When we look at the history of interfaith dialogue and cooperation, we have to acknowledge the movement was inaugurated and supported by more liberal wings of the various religions in general and, in particular, progressive Christians. If it weren't for them, we would never have moved from where we were in the early 20th century.

Today, liberals continue to carry the banner for this effort. Conservative religious adherents traditionally have been wary of interfaith activities, though that is changing in many quarters. But, is it possible progressives



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I was hosting Interfaith Dialogue Association's radio show, "Common Threads" (WGVU-FM, Sundays at 7 a.m. and 6:30 p.m.), and interviewing the director of a multireligious organization in New York. I asked her about the inclusion of more conservative Christians in her work. Specifically, I posed the question, "Can someone who declares that Jesus is the only way be welcomed in interfaith circles?"

might be hampering interfaith growth? If what happened not long ago is any metric, indeed, it could be true.

She replied, "I would hope he would say that Jesus is the only way for me." I was disappointed with this answer. If that person is a conservative evangelical, he would not phrase it like that. He would believe Jesus is the only way for every man, woman and child on the planet.

One of the cardinal rules of interfaith dialogue is, "Thou shalt not compromise thy faith." Asking an evangelical or other conservative to speak like a Unitarian is one surefire way to throw out the unwelcome mat for that particular demographic. As an organization that has encouraged greater participation from Baptists, Reformed, Pentecostals and others who share those same core dogmas

and values, IDA always has welcomed everyone to openly and forthrightly state his or her theological opinions without apology.

One would hope, however, that in a dialogue group, each member is respectful of other perspectives. In one such group, a member admitted he was only there to gather information on all the other religions in order to convert them.

While I would hope for more tolerance and respect, I still have to give this guy credit for the fact that he did seek to learn directly from those who practiced a faith that was not his own. And, when it came to the issue of salvation, we should have been able to accept his declaration that only those who share his beliefs will

receive God's mercy. Hearing that doesn't mean we have to believe it or like it. But we must respect how that article of faith shapes the life of the person holding it.

Deep exchange on matters spiritual is not always comfortable. It can challenge assumptions and provoke wonderfully painful questions for the right and for the left. But this must be done in what all participants would agree to be a very safe space, where mutual respect is palpable.

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