

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Facing the future: With a politics of fear, or with faith and trust

**Douglas Kindschi**

Director, Kaufman
Interfaith Institute

During this season, I have been concerned about the politics of fear.

There seems to be fear on all sides.

The fear of those who have lost jobs and are afraid of being left behind in the emerging global economy.

The fear of those who see a new political climate where refugees, immigrants, and people of color face hateful words and actions that have been made to seem acceptable.

The fear that religious freedom may not apply to all religious groups, when all members of a particular faith are judged by a very small minority that have resorted to violence.

Yet, in this Christmas season, I am aware of the frequent Scriptural occurrences of the phrase "fear not." In the Gospel stories, Joseph and Mary are addressed by angels with the admonition, "Fear not." Likewise the shepherds are told, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

Likewise, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the phrase "Fear not" often is given in

the face of fear.

Abram is told "Fear not" when he is afraid the promise of being the father of many nations will not occur since he has no offspring. When Hagar is afraid that her son Ishmael will perish in the desert, the Lord appears with the assurance, "fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad." (Genesis 21:17)

When the brothers of Joseph fear retribution from him following the death of their father, Joseph assures them with, "Fear not. ... You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good." (Genesis 50:19-20)

Moses addressed the people in the wilderness when they feared capture by Pharaoh's army saying, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today." (Exodus 14:13)

Isaiah reassures the people with the words from the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1)

Likewise, Jesus comforts his disciples with, "Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Luke 12:7)

While in many situations fear is real, we have thus been counseled not to live in fear. But there is also a "politics of fear." where

fear — both real and imagined — is cynically used to push certain political agendas.

In a recent article, Rabbi Donniel Hartman from Jerusalem warns us that the politics of fear can have "catastrophic moral consequences."

"Under the politics of fear, we can become morally righteous, despite our oppression of others."

Hartman then describes a less recognized, but even more morally challenging, phenomenon, which he labels the Politics of But, or more precisely the Politics of "Yes — but."

He recognizes that it can take on various forms depending on the occasion and societal situation.

"In Israel, it looks something like this," Hartman writes. "I am committed to equality for all of Israel's citizens, Jew and Arab — but security must come first. Jews ought to be sensitive to the needs of refugees — but we need to preserve Israel as a Jewish state."

How does the Politics of "Yes — but" work in America?

We regularly affirm that all persons have inalienable rights — but immigrants and refugees are taking away our jobs.

Yes, we believe in freedom of religion — but some people of a different religion have

committed terrorist acts, so we must monitor all such adherents for fear that they are all violent.

We believe in the dignity of all — but some citizens, who have not voted as I voted, can't possibility be moral or have a significant contribution to make to our political discourse.

Hartman concludes with words for our setting as well as his own: "Decent people committed to the principle of human equality ... have allowed the Politics of But to misdirect our moral compasses. We have given to the haunting voice of But too much sway over our lives and our principles."

It is not enough to just affirm our basic principles enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Affirmation that does not comport with our actions, excused by the Politics of But, will not bring us together for the common good.

We need new coalitions and new engagement with those with whom we disagree or even fear. We no longer can act out of a politics of fear and distrust, but out of a faith that affirms and accepts all who are made in God's image.

interfaith@gvsu.edu