

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# A call to humility for Christians in interfaith

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Through my interfaith work this past year, and specifically a conversation with visiting lecturer Simran Jeet Singh, I have reflected on the role of privilege in interfaith spaces. Christians traditionally have held a lot of power in the interfaith community. They are able to choose to participate in interfaith dialogue and action, as opposed to religious minorities, who engage because their rights and survival may depend on it.

With this in mind, I wonder, "As Christians, how do we denounce our power and privilege while also maintaining an exclusivist belief system?" Also, "How do Christians engage interfaith in a way that is helpful and not hurtful for the interfaith community and pluralism more broadly?" I propose four suggestions.

### KNOWING HISTORY

Christians can learn the dark side of Christian history and the history of Christians in interfaith engagement. This includes the "big stuff" like the crusades and slavery, but also things like understanding how Christians are viewed more favorably when running for public office than people who are religious minorities. It includes recognizing when the church has



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failed to enact the gospel it believes in.

In terms of the interfaith movement, Christians have a history of providing the funding for interfaith institutes and scholarship, giving them the ability to set the terms of interfaith relationships and use the interfaith arena as a means to gain more power in society.

### BEYOND A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL GROUPS

Christians can understand religious groups sociologically, not simply theologically. Religious groups in America are not simply people who believe different things. Religious communities are also economic, geographic and social communities and hold different places in society because of their numbers, wealth, ethnic/racial background, political ties and other factors.

Power and privilege emerge from the interactions of these identities (including theology/ideology). So, for example, a religion may have proselytization/evangelism as a part of its world view, but it may not

have a lot of power in society. On the other hand, a religion with a lot of power, plus the impetus of evangelism, can have both dynamics interacting in complex ways that may amplify power.

### A THEOLOGY OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

Christians can know and teach a theology of basic human rights, in which we defend the rights of another regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality, ability level, class, etc. For most Christians, this will come out of a doctrine of creation that teaches that we are all made "in the image of God."

For others, it will come out of the call in Matthew to "love your neighbor as yourself." Either way, Christianity has a history of being on the front lines of humanitarian aid when disaster strikes as well as serving the poor and sick because of our understanding of the innate value of all humans.

### LOVE AMID DISAGREEMENT

Christians can call out the lie in our society that love means agreement. While our culture's emphasis on acceptance is a strength, it becomes illusory when it means that to love someone, you have to completely affirm their beliefs, values and opinions. This is especially challenging when it comes to issues that can be harmful to others.

For example, I am a woman whose goal it is to someday become ordained in the church. I have a friend who is more conservative than I, and he does not believe that women should be allowed to be leaders in the church. Do I disagree with him? Absolutely. But he has the right to hold theology that informs his practice and that differs from my own. I can still love my friend, and he can love me, even though we disagree. This becomes helpful in interfaith situations because we do not need to affirm people's theology to still love our (Muslim, atheist, etc.) neighbor.

In conclusion, it is important to note that Christians may differ generationally on the internal work that they need to do. From intergenerational conversations, I have learned that older Christians may need to learn more about "denouncing power and privilege," while Christian millennials may need to develop comfort with the exclusivity or orthodoxy of our faith if we are to be authentic to historic Christianity.

Either way, Christians have an important role in both the interfaith community and the religious diversity of our country. By being aware of our power and privilege, we can work more effectively with other religious communities towards peace.

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