

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Seeking confident pluralism as path to peace



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"It is impossible to live at peace with those we regard as damned."

So said the 18th century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau as quoted by John D. Inazu, political scientist and law professor at Washington University in St. Louis. Speaking last week at the January Series at Calvin College, he addressed the topic of "Confident Pluralism." Rather than being threatened by diversity and pluralism, he called for us to embrace the differences around us because we are confident in our own beliefs.

As a law professor, Inazu was speaking primarily about the political diversity in our democracy and the importance of civic dialogue and engagement. While the Constitution guarantees our freedom of speech, we still need a respectful approach to our differences, and to speech that is charitable, not hateful. In like manner, we have freedom of religion, but if our exclusivist approach to our religious belief leads us to consider anyone who differs to be "damned," then, as Rousseau suggests, it may be "impossible to live at peace."

In his book, "Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference," Inazu proposes a political solution to what he calls the "practical problem of our deep differences." We not only have the legal and constitutional components which bring a

foundation for order, but also the cultural practices that enable "us to function — and even to flourish — despite the divisions arising out of our deeply held beliefs."

Affirming confidence in our own beliefs without a commitment to pluralism leads to the suppression of differences, sometimes violently, not only against ideas but also against the persons with whom we disagree.

"Conversely, pluralism without confidence papers over our real differences for the sake of a false unity," he writes. "We end up pretending that we all agree or share some basic ideas when in fact we don't, and it's an unstable and unauthentic way to live together."

The real question is, how do we participate and contribute in the spaces that the law does not govern?

## PRACTICES THAT ALLOW CONFIDENT PLURALISM

Consider, for example, the right to free speech. We have the legal right to say almost anything to almost anybody, but what is our responsibility in promoting a civil society and a pluralism that respects others with whom we do not agree? Is it not just what we have the right to say, but what should we say if we are to contribute to this pluralistic society?

We argue for what we believe, but not in ways that marginalize, dehumanize or dishonor others. For this, Inazu calls for the civic practices of tolerance, humility and

patience.

"With tolerance, I'm asking ... that we accept other beliefs and practices even when we disagree with them. That doesn't mean we fully embrace them. It just means that we allow for their coexistence in our society, and that means distinguishing between people and ideas. It's not suggesting that all ideas are equally valid or morally harmless, because they're not."

"Humility ... asks that we recognize that our understandings and justifications for our own beliefs and practices will not always be translatable to other people. So we have to recognize ... that other people will sometimes not understand the basis for our beliefs and values."

"Then patience is the idea that we work charitably to listen, understand and empathize with others. ... The goal is not always complete reconciliation or acceptance of beliefs, but at least an understanding of where certain beliefs come from and why people hold them."

Perhaps this commitment is best summarized in a quote from his website: "It is often better to tolerate than to protest, better to project humility than defensiveness, and better to wait patiently for the fruits of persuasion than to force the consequences of coercion. Confident Pluralism will not give us the American Dream. But it might help avoid the American Nightmare."

As a Christian, Inazu calls for "a charitable understanding of other people created in the image of God that can allow us to pur-

sue and push into relationships even when they're tough, even with people who don't agree with us, even into risky and messy spaces. So it seems to me that Christians, of all people, should be emboldened to pursue these kinds of relationships across difference."

## CONFIDENCE AND RESPECT

This reminds me of the evangelist Billy Graham who, in one of his final interviews at retirement, was asked whether he believed heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people. Graham responded: "Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't. ... I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have."

Graham certainly was confident in his own Christian beliefs, but also confident that he was called to preach and not judge. It was a confident pluralism that enabled him to communicate to a broad spectrum of the religious and non-religious world.

It is a challenge for all of us, in the political and religious world, to affirm with confidence our beliefs but in a way that respects others and does not judge them as "damned." Only in this way can we maintain the hope to "live at peace."

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