

Proselytizing in a Multi-Faith World

Why mutual respect and tolerance require us to witness for Christ.

Ed Stetzer | posted 3/28/2011 12:00AM

Five years ago, I found myself sitting in an interfaith meeting. Gracious people from different religions and denominations had gathered at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's headquarters in Chicago to plan the ongoing work of congregational research. The goal of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership was to bring together participants from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, and Orthodox churches to research and compare our findings. I was unsure whether I belonged at the meeting. In one session, the facilitator explained that the research should lead to cooperative resourcing to help all of our congregations. He suggested we could jointly create, publish, and distribute resources to help congregations in faith development and growth.

At the appropriate time, and with my best smile, I raised my hand and said something like this: "I appreciate the funding that allows us to survey our churches, and I think it is helpful to use similar questions and metrics for better research. But I am not here to form a partnership to help one another. I want to help the churches I serve, and part of the reason they exist is to convert some of you."

I paused, smiled, and worked hard not to sound menacing (it was probably too late). Some participants in the room looked at me as if I had just uttered a string of profanities. Others nodded in agreement. Then the Muslim imam seated next to me said, in effect, "I feel the same way."

Though the imam and I were in a minority in that group of predominantly liberal Protestants, we represented the movements among us that are actually growing in numbers. Both he and I believed in sharing and enlarging our faiths. We did not think we were worshiping the same God or gods, and we were not there under the pretense that we held the same beliefs. In other words, our goal was not merging faiths, combining beliefs, or even interfaith partnership.

The imam and I had a good laugh after the meeting. At the same time, we acknowledged that we were not of the same faith and, honestly, that we would each be overjoyed if we could bring the other to the truth—not just *our* truth but *the* truth, as we firmly believed it.

Without using the word, we were acknowledging that in such a context, we are *multi-faith*. When people of different faiths are found together, in a conference, neighborhood, or nation, they are best described as multi-faith, representing different faiths.

Worldwide trends indicate that multi-faith is both a current reality and our future. The number of people who claim adherence to the major world religions is growing. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and other post-Enlightenment thinkers predicted the death of God and the decline of religious belief over 100 years ago, but their predictions were premature. In fact, secular thinking has long embraced the idea that religion was the socio-political problem, not so much the solution.

If anything, "God is dead" has been replaced with "God is back." Economists John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, an atheist and a Roman Catholic, wrote a

fascinating book in 2008 with that title. In it they noted that while statistics about religious observance are notoriously untrustworthy, most surveys seem to indicate that the global drift toward secularism has halted. Quite a few surveys show religious belief to be on the rise. They reference one source that says that "the proportion of people attached to the world's four largest religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—rose from 67 percent in 1900 to 73 percent in 2005, and may reach 80 percent by 2025."

"Multi-faith" might sound strange to some, yet the idea gains traction if peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding in a crowded religious world are important—and I think they are. To see why it's important, we need to look at alternate ways of framing our religious situation.

Moving Beyond Interfaith

For years, many people of various faiths have promoted "interfaith dialogue" in order to discover common ground and work together for humanity's sake. That sounds good, until we start digging below the surface.

Many of those involved in interfaith dialogue approach it as if there are no fundamental distinctions or differences between them. By way of contrast, in a multi-faith world, we recognize that we are not worshipping the same God or gods, nor are we pursuing the same goals. And we are not offended by our mutual desire to proselytize one another. (I use the term *proselytize* instead of *evangelize*, as *evangelism* is a distinctively Christian term having to do with the proclamation of the Good News.)

The central assumption of many in the interfaith dialogue business has been that at their core, all religious people—Hindus and Buddhists, Muslims and Jews, Christians and Animists—are striving for the same thing, and are just using different words and concepts to get there. We should therefore be able to cooperate around common beliefs to improve society, the reasoning goes. But how true is that assumption? Let's take a closer look at the four world religions that represent about three-quarters of the global population. (Recent population surveys indicate that worldwide there are 2.1 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims, 900 million Hindus, and 376 million Buddhists.) And let's start with the most basic belief in each religion: the idea of God. Within the various streams of Hindu thought alone, there are multiple answers to the question, "Who or what is god?" Hindus can believe that there is one god, 330 million gods, or no god at all. The Vedas, the most ancient of Hindu scriptures, which are accepted by most Hindus as normative, teach that *atman is Brahman*, or "the soul is god," meaning that god is in each of us and each of us is part of god. The common greeting *Namaste*, which means, roughly, "The god within me recognizes and greets the god within you," reflects this belief.

In his apologetic for the Buddhist faith, Ven S. Dhammika, the author of several popular books on Buddhism, writes, "Do Buddhists believe in god? No, we do not. There are several reasons for this. The Buddha, like modern sociologists and psychologists, believed that religious ideas and especially the god idea have their origin in fear. The Buddha says, 'Gripped by fear, men go to the sacred mountains, sacred groves, sacred trees and shrines.'" So, for most orthodox Buddhists (in the Theravada tradition), the concept of a personal supreme being is at best unimportant, at worst an oppressive superstition.

What about Islam? In the Qur'an, sura 112 ayat 1-4, we read, "Say: He is Allah, the One and Only. Allah, the Eternal, Absolute. He begets not, nor is he begotten. And there is none like unto him." This passage in a primer for Muslim children puts it simply: "Allah is absolute, and free from all defects and has no partner. He exists from eternity and shall remain eternal. All are dependent on him, but he is independent of all. He is father to none, nor has he any son."

In contrast, Christians believe that there is one God who is creator of the world. He is a personal God, a conscious, free, and righteous being. And he is not only a personal God but a God of providence who is involved in the day-to-day affairs of creation. He is a righteous God who expects ethical behavior from each of us. He expects his followers to live out their belief by loving him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and by loving their neighbors as themselves. God, while one in essence, also reveals himself in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So according to the four largest world religions, God is one with creation and takes on millions of forms, God may or may not exist, God is one and absolute, and God is one but exists in three persons.

If we cannot agree on even the basic definition of God or his character, how can we say that all the major religions are on the same path toward the truth about God? Pretending that we all believe the same thing does not foster dialogue but in fact prohibits it. By assuming that all religions teach the same thing, how are we to explore, consider, and dialogue concerning differences? How can we discuss humanity's responsibility to each other, the eternal destiny of those with whom we share the globe, the nature of truth, or the meaning of life? For us to talk about these things, we must acknowledge that our answers are different. We must acknowledge that we are in fact multi-faith—with radically different visions of the future, eternity, and the path to getting there.

On the other hand, admitting that we are multi-faith is only a beginning. We also need to be willing to live together with those whose beliefs are different from our own. This means allowing adherents of other faiths to live out their convictions without creating constant conflict. The world has seen too much pain and suffering as the result of followers of one faith using political or military means to impose their views on followers of another.

So how do religions that are mutually exclusive peacefully exist side by side? In the spirit of multi-faith dialogue, I would like to propose four foundational commitments that the followers of the world's religions could agree to make. We commit to do the following:

- Let each religion speak for itself.
- Talk with and about individuals, not generic "faiths."
- Respect the sincerely held beliefs of people of other religions.
- Grant each person the freedom to make his or her faith decisions.

What would each of these look like in practice?

Let each religion speak for itself

A friend of mine living in India had an interesting conversation with a Hindu about Islam. In all sincerity, the Hindu said, "As you know, Hindus do not eat beef because

we worship cows. Similarly, Muslims do not eat pork because they worship pigs." He didn't realize how false, even offensive, his assertion was.

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What happened? The man used his beliefs to try to interpret what he saw in Islam. Had he understood his error, he would have been horrified. He was not malicious, just ill-informed.

When we assume we understand the worldview of others better than they understand it, we get into all kinds of trouble. The same problem can occur when some Muslims try to explain the Trinity. Across the globe, Christians are accused of worshiping three gods—God the Father, God the Mother, and God the Son. The idea that God would have a physical relationship with a woman and produce a child is as offensive to Christians as it is to Muslims. But instead of asking Christians what they believe, many Muslims are content to get their information from non-Christians rather than go to the source.

Any researcher will tell you that examining primary sources is vital to establishing solid research. If someone wants to understand Judaism, he should read the Talmud and visit a synagogue. The same applies to someone who wants to learn about Hinduism: Talk to Hindus, and read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (two ancient Sanskrit texts). To find out what is important to Muslims, don't watch biased news reports—from liberal or conservative media. Rather, talk to your Muslim neighbors. And to understand the message of Christianity, read the Bible and meet with followers of Christ.

That is why, on a recent trip to Westminster Chapel in London, I preached on the need for Christians to be on mission to reach out to their neighbors. I brought pastors to help plant churches in communities of people who are without Christ. But we also took the time to visit the largest Sikh temple (*gurdwara*) in England. I covered my head as a sign of respect, listened to the *granthi*(leaders) as they read from the Guru Granth Sahib, and prayed for those whom I met.

It matters to learn from those of other faiths. We should not be afraid of this. If we believe, as I do, that we have found the truth—or in my case, that the Truth has found me—then a mutual search for truth will lead people in the right direction.

Talk with *Individuals*

My second proposal is an extension of the first: I suggest that we develop the habit of talking with and about individuals, not "faiths." Many factors influence what a person believes. To know what someone believes based on a single-word label is impossible. No correct sentence can start with the words, "All Hindus in the world agree that ... ," or, "Every Christian knows that"

Not long ago, political commentator and television personality Bill O'Reilly appeared on the daytime talk show *The View*. He created an uproar by saying that Muslims were responsible for the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers. Two of the hosts left in protest.

According to a USA Today report, in responding to the incident, Feisal Rauf, developer of the proposed Islamic Cultural Center near Ground Zero, said, "If future generations are to live in a safe and peaceful world, we must break the cycle of misunderstanding and mistrust that encourages extremism here and around the world. Mr. O'Reilly's uninformed comments were offensive, not only to his interviewers, but also to millions of American Muslims."

"Muslims" did not attack the World Trade Center. A handful of Islamic extremists associated with al Qaeda did. O'Reilly acknowledged this and later backtracked in order to clarify that he did not believe all Muslims were terrorists or responsible for 9/11.

Similarly, in response to the actions of an American who desecrated a Qur'an, violent mobs in South Asia attacked Christians and burnt their churches and schools. This happened in spite of the fact that nearly every Christian leader worldwide publicly decried the desecration.

Meanwhile, there is a popular debate in India over the use of the terms "saffron terror" and "Hindu terrorism." Many Hindus are appalled by the actions of a small minority who use terrorism to advance a political agenda in the name of Hinduism. To color an entire religion by the actions of a handful of extremists is unhelpful. Individual believers are not personally responsible for the actions of others who claim affiliation with their group.

Respect Others' Beliefs

This leads to my third point: How can we respect the sincerely held beliefs of adherents of other religions without compromising our own?

Of course, understanding someone's values and beliefs does not mean accepting those beliefs. It is acceptable and part and parcel of living in a free society to believe that others are wrong. But it is unacceptable to smear leaders, burn books others consider holy, or equate the radical fringe of a religion with the religion's core beliefs. We must not compare the worst of someone else's religion with the best of our own. Al Qaeda does not represent mainstream Islam any more than one Qur'an-burning pastor or the Ku Klux Klan represents Jesus' followers.

Each of us can take the positive step of speaking out against the people in our tradition whose actions derail that tradition's central messages. Too often people condemn the excesses of other groups while defending the actions of their own. Silence among our own is inexcusable, prideful, and cowardly. Instead, we should be just as quick to point out when followers of our own tradition are acting against our teachings.

In a recent New York Times column, Nicholas D. Kristof wrote: "Many Americans have suggested that more moderate Muslims should stand up to extremists, speak out for tolerance, and apologize for sins committed by their religion. That's reasonable advice, and as a moderate myself, I am going to take it."

I hereby apologize to Muslims for the wave of bigotry and simple nuttiness that has lately been directed at you [in the United States]. The venom on the airwaves, equating Muslims with terrorists, should embarrass us more than you. Muslims are

one of the last minorities in the United States that it is still possible to demean openly, and I apologize for the slurs.

Like Kristof, I can apologize for the excesses of Christian leaders who have misrepresented the Islamic faith and thus strayed from the message of Jesus. When Christians caricature or misrepresent others, we are guilty of violating a teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (7:12). As Christians, we have felt the sting of being blamed for actions taken by a radical fringe of our faith. It is simply unfair—and in my case, unchristian—to sit by and allow or actively take part in lying about those of another religion.

Part of respecting others' beliefs is allowing them to proselytize without getting offended.

Sincere followers of any faith would agree: Sharing with others the way to right belief is not oppression but in fact an active demonstration of love and concern.

While Hinduism has not traditionally been considered a missionary religion, many modern Hindus have been influenced by the three great missionary religions (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam). Sects such as the Hare Krishna movement and Osho are bringing their versions of Hinduism to all corners of the globe.

According to religious scholar Richard Foltz, Buddhism launched "the first large-scale missionary effort in the history of the world's religions" in the third century B.C. After his conversion to Buddhism, the Indian emperor Ashoka sent out missionaries to preach the Buddha's message and gather converts throughout South Asia and beyond, eventually touching regions as distant as Greece, Iran, Sri Lanka, and China. Those efforts continue today, and now Buddhists can be found on every inhabited continent.

Seeking converts is a central practice in Islam known as *dawah*, or "invitation." As a matter of fact, Yusuf Estes, a former self-identifying Christian who converted to Islam, says that "as Muslims we cannot lie about anything, especially about our religion." Consequently, he says, it is impossible to be a Muslim and not invite others to follow "the Straight Path" of Islam.

Christianity, of course, has been a missionary movement since its beginning. Jesus himself, in his final address to his followers, commanded them to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). And speaking to Christians everywhere and in all eras, the apostle Paul said, "For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16).

What is that gospel preached by Paul? The gospel is the good news that God, who is more holy than we can imagine, looked with compassion upon people, who are more sinful than we would possibly admit or even know, and sent Jesus into history to establish his kingdom and reconcile people and the world to himself. Jesus, whose love is more extravagant than we can measure, came to sacrificially die for us so

that, by his death and resurrection, we might gain through his grace what the Christian Scriptures define as new and eternal life.

As a follower of Christ, I must live and proclaim that message, or I am not really a follower of Christ. To say, "You can be a Christian as long as you do not share the gospel" is nonsensical. It would be as ridiculous as saying, "Go ahead and be a Muslim, just don't submit to Allah." Or, "Be an observant Jew, but do not follow Torah." Or, "You are free to be a Buddhist so long as you make no effort to follow the eight-fold path." As Charles Spurgeon once said, "Every Christian is either a missionary or an impostor."

Sincere followers of any faith would agree: Sharing with others the way to right belief is not oppression but in fact an active demonstration of love and concern. Even atheists like famous magician Penn Jillette, who frequently speaks against theism in general and Christianity in particular, understand the importance of telling people what you believe.

On his video blog, "Penn Says," Jillette shared the story of an audience member who gave him a Bible as a gift. The man admitted that he was proselytizing. Jillette described how much he valued this man's concern for him:

I don't respect people who don't proselytize, [who] believe that there is a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell (or not getting eternal life or whatever) and you think that, well it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward. And atheists who think that people should not proselytize—"Just leave me alone, keep your religion to yourself" ... How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?

We must get beyond the nonsense of saying, "You can believe what you want, but you can't tell anyone else about it." To respect others' beliefs means to understand that being a follower of a faith that you believe offers hope for all humanity yet keeping it to yourself is untenable. That is true whether that believer is a Muslim in Manhattan, a Hindu in China, or a Christian in Kabul.

Grant Each Person Freedom

This brings us to my final proposal: We must grant each person the freedom to make his or her own faith decisions.

I grew up on Long Island in an Irish Catholic home. Actually, that is not true—the Catholic Church was the church we did not go to when we stayed home every week. Later, God worked in my heart through his Holy Spirit regarding Jesus' death on the cross, for my sin, in my place. When I repented of my sin and trusted in Christ by grace through faith, I was given new life in him. I had the religious liberty to respond without restraint.

Earlier I wrote that all religions are not the same. But it does seem to me that most religions have two things in common. First, every major faith teaches its followers not to force others into the faith. Second, some followers in every religion ignore that injunction.

The Qur'an, sura 2 ayat 256, says plainly, "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects Taghut (evil) and believes in Allah

hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things."

In his book *All about Hinduism*, Sri Swami Sivananda, a well-known proponent of yoga and Vedanta, writes, "Hinduism is a religion of freedom. It allows the widest freedom in matters of faith and worship. It allows absolute freedom to the human reason and heart with regard to questions such as the nature of God, soul, creation, form of worship, and goal of life. It does not force anybody to accept particular dogmas or forms of worship."

No matter where we live or what religion we follow, we should not demand for ourselves that which we are unwilling to grant others—freedom from compulsion and from discrimination on the basis of creed.

Earlier we saw that Emperor Ashoka was a great force in the early Buddhist missionary movement. He built large pillars inscribed with the core values of his faith. Among the inscriptions, we find the following: "One must not exalt one's creed discrediting all others, nor must one degrade these others without legitimate reasons. One must, on the contrary, render to other creeds the honor befitting them."

Jesus' closest followers had trouble understanding that force was forbidden in religion. One day he was walking toward Jerusalem and entered a Samaritan village. The people of Samaria did not respect the faith of the Jews. Jesus sent two of his closest followers, James and John, to go ahead of him and prepare for them to stay. When the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus, James and John responded angrily, asking Jesus to call down fire from heaven to punish them. But Jesus said that the use of force was out of place for his message, and he rebuked them for making such a suggestion (Luke 9:54-55). Whenever Christians have tried to use force to advance the gospel, they have acted against the wishes of Jesus.

Tragically, while a lack of compulsion is the ideal in each of these religions, it has not always been the reality. Not long ago, in Bangladesh, eight Christians were kidnapped by Buddhist extremists, who brought the group into their temple. The Christians had their heads shaved, were forced to wear Buddhist robes, were made to clean out the temple, and were forced to bow down to an idol. During their captivity, they were threatened with severe punishment. Their wives were forced to bow before an idol each day before being allowed to give the captives food. Muslims in the United States have received threats by so-called followers of Christ. In central Nigeria, rivalry between Muslim and Christian villagers has frequently resulted in deadly attacks—Muslim against Christian, Christian against Muslim—over the past decade.

In the spirit of mutual respect and tolerance, Muslims should be free to build a *masjid* where they live, and Christians should defend their religious freedom to do so. At the same time, Christians should be free to plant churches in places like Bhutan, the Maldives, Brunei, and Saudi Arabia. No matter where we live or what religion we follow, we should not demand for ourselves that which we are unwilling to grant others—freedom from compulsion, freedom from discrimination on the basis of creed, and freedom of conscience.

In faithfulness to our respective founders' teachings, let us avoid the kind of tolerance that keeps us silent when we believe we have a valuable message to share. At the same time, may we discover a new kind of tolerance—a tolerance that allows and even encourages others to explore and respond to the Truth.

Ed Stetzer is president of LifeWay Christian Research. He earned a Ph.D. in missions and is the author of many books. His most recent book, written with Thom Rainer, is [Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations](#) (LifeWay). Copyright © 2011 Christianity Today. [Click](#) for reprint information.