
Passionately Christian And Compassionately Interfaith

An article from the *Cathedral Times*

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It is one of the most pressing needs in our church today: the need to be passionately Christian and compassionately interfaith.

Many of us stumble and stutter when we are asked the perennial question: will only Christians be saved? If it's not that particular question, it's one very similar. Almost every adult in the United States has probably asked that sort of question, or has been asked that sort of question. How are we Christians supposed to answer it?

First of all, I propose that each of us needs a special measure of humility even to approach the subject. May God give each of us grace when we presume to speculate on the afterlife, whether if it's our own, but especially if it's someone else's! Judgment, thank God, belongs to God alone. I find it quite possible, and even liberating, not to speak about those matters about which only God is final arbiter, the final judge.

In fact, there may not be an urgent need for Christianity to answer the question of "universal salvation." But there is definitely a need for each of us to know how to behave in an increasingly multi-faith world. This is the subject I addressed in the Dean's Forum of September 17, 2006 (soon to be available on disk or podcast).

For me, the answer lies in the title I have given to this newsletter piece. The first principle in living in a multi-faith world is to be unabashedly Christian. The world needs more passionate Christians, not less passionate ones. But the world also needs the second principle: compassion in interfaith relationships.

In other words, God does not need more Christians passionate only about wiping out all other forms of religious expression. God needs Christians who are passionate about who we are, about our own identities, but who are yet compassionate toward the religious identities of other folks.

In fact, the best "interfaith dialogues" are those where Christians-and others-do not try simply to bend down to the lowest common denominator, or try to soften everything we believe. The best interfaith dialogues are those where people are strong and fully convinced of their own religious identities. The world needs passionate and sure Christians!

I was fortunate to experience a small touch of this sort of conversation during my "Good Faith" trip to the Arab world in January. With six other Episcopal priests (and two representatives from Cambridge University, England), I met with Muslims of good will in Egypt, Qatar, and Oman.

Together, the nine of us found some very progressive and open expressions of Islam. These scholars and imams of good faith were as worried about Christian exclusivism as some Christians are worried about Islamic exclusivism. The same worries arose with regard to American and Arab identities. "Why don't the moderate Americans speak up?" we heard them ask, in the same way I have heard Americans ask, "Why don't the moderate Arabs speak up?"

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