

Interfaith Initiatives: Lessons from the Midwest

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One of the things I have learned from my interfaith experiences is that the number of people converting to Islam as a result of interfaith participation should not be the primary way of measuring the success of the interfaith activity. The reason is that if the success of the initiative is based on the number of people converting, then the fact that no one converts as a result may be perceived to be an indication of failure. If the number of people converting to Islam is not the best measure of success, than what is? I would like to offer the following as success indicators resulting from Muslim participation in interfaith initiatives:

- An increase in understanding of Islam.
- Greater awareness of Islam's common elements with other faiths.
- Less discrimination toward Muslims on the part of people of faith.
- More invitations received by Muslims to share their faith.
- Higher occurrences of Islam being mentioned as a legitimate mainstream American faith, alongside Judaism and Christianity.

Another aspect of interfaith activity that merits attention is the matter of dos and don'ts when presenting Islam. Here is a partial list:

Dos

Mention that Islam more in common with Judaism and Christianity, compared to Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism/Daoism, Shintoism, and Confucianism.

Apologize for injustices committed by Muslims against other faith communities.

(e.g. The destruction of the most sacred church in Christianity in Palestine by the Fatimid Caliph, which is one of the factors that precipitated the Crusades).

Mention the story of Prophet Jesus' birth (peace be upon him) in the Quran.

Point out how Muslims have done great things in history when they followed the ethics of Islam, and how Muslims have done terrible things in history when they violated the ethics of Islam (the creation of free imaret restaurants, on the one hand, and attacking the World Trade Center, on the other hand).

Separate Islam from the culture of Muslims.

Highlight the role of the Quran as a spiritual guide, the role of the imam as a social reformer, and the role of the mosque as a place of learning.

Distinguish between Islam in theory and Islam in practice.

Point out the difference between Arab and Muslim (a linguistic group versus a religious group).

Praise the positive role played by Arab Christians and Arab Jews in supporting Arab Muslims during the Dark Ages of Europe.

Mention that 'Allah' is the Arabic word for 'The God' or 'The Lord' and that Arab Christians and Arab Jews refer to God as 'Allah.'

Focus on the fact that Muslims are required to respect the People of the Book and the books of the People of the Book (such as the Torah, Psalms and Gospel/ Tawrat, Zaboor and Injeel).

Don'ts

Avoid mentioning anything negative about the other faiths.

Avoid apologizing for Islam (which is very different than apologizing for the unjust actions of Muslims, as mentioned above).

Avoid referring to God as 'He' (It is better to avoid any pronouns when referring to God).

Never say anything derogatory about another faith (it is wrong to make Islam look good by making other religions look bad).

Avoid statements that imply that the Bible and Torah are 'wrong' or 'false' or altered by humans.

When engaging in interfaith dialogue, it is a good practice to be honest about the evil deeds committed by Muslims. It is even more important to be truthful about the evil deeds committed by Muslims in the name of Islam. It is a terrible crime when a Muslim commits murder. It is an even more heinous crime when a Muslim commits murder in the name of Islam. Crimes committed by Muslims ruin the reputation of Muslims. Crimes committed in the name of Islam ruin the reputation of Islam. When John Allen Muhammad murdered innocent people, he committed a horrible crime. When Ramzy Yusuf planned the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 in the name of Islam, he committed an even greater crime. When Hafez Alassad slaughtered 20,000 people in Hama, Syria, he committed a crime against humanity. When the Taliban slaughtered

people in Afghanistan in the name of Islam, they committed a crime against humanity and a crime against Islam.

It is also critical in interfaith dialogue to highlight the tradition of the ten commandments in shaping Muslim ethics. By taking the principles set down by God in the ten commandments delivered to Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and continuing the tradition of the rule of law established by Hammurabi, Muslims were able to create a system of justice that was superior to any judicial system preceding it. When Muslim political leaders held themselves above the law and became the worst violators of the ten commandments, Islamic civilization declined.

It is bad manners to get offended and defensive when audience members are critical of Muslim governments, Muslim institutions, and Muslim scholars. The critique may be a false critique, but it is still not a critique of Islam. If audience members critique Islam directly (by claiming, for example, that the practice of polygamy is misogynist and demeaning to women) then it is better to steer the discussion toward the goals rather than the means. Point out that Muslims faced a problem of widows and children who needed to be taken care of, and polygamy was a solution. If the solution had more disadvantages rather than advantages, then steer the discussion toward a friendly quest of finding better solutions. All the while make it clear that any social, economic, or political practice of Muslims should be discussed and critiqued; while any of the five pillars of Islam should be treated as discussable, but at the same time worthy of greater respect and a higher level of sensitivity than non-ritual practices.

It is very counterproductive to engage in debates regard Israel. Interfaith dialogues are meant to focus on issues of religious significance to Jews, Christians and

Muslims. Political debates should be left for other forums. It is perfectly legitimate for a Muslim speaker to be asked about his or her views of Israel. However, it is better to point out that every person has differing views on the foreign policies and social conditions of various countries. Given the importance of conflict resolution in the Middle East, it is better to understand what Islam, Christianity, and Judaism have to say about conflict resolution, rather than engaging in a frequently time-consuming and fruitless debate about what the speaker thinks about Israel.

It is much more useful to share insights into the emphasis that Islam puts on cleanliness and purity. It is much less useful to focus on Muslim punitive practices. Ablution and showering are great topics of conversation, while hand amputation and stoning to death are much more complex subjects. Judicial practices should be discussed if they are brought up by the audience, rather than being brought up by the speaker. If the Muslim speaker is asked about such practices as beheading (for convicted murderers) and whipping (for unreformed public drunkards) it is very helpful to give truthful answers, while putting these practices in their historical context. We may dislike these practices, but these practices are not limited to Muslims (such as death by hanging for horse thieves in the American West and caning for car vandalizers in Singapore). Some may argue that such practices existed in 'barbarian' societies in the past but have no place in modern civilized societies. In that case, the speaker may point out that such practices should be reviewed on the basis of their merits. Are they the most effective way of dealing with crime? If yes, then let us prove it through solid scientific research. If there are more effective ways, then Muslims would be more than happy to abandon less effective techniques and adopt more effective techniques. At the same time, it can be pointed out

that Muslims are required by their Creator, as do other people of faith, to do what is most conducive to the preservation of human rights and avoid what entails a violation of human rights.

One of the most important Prophetic traditions that should be emphasized in interfaith discussion is the following: “Almuslim ala alMuslimi haramun maaluhu wa damuhu wa irduh.” [Muslims are prohibited from taking another’s property, life, and honor]. This is a fundamental Muslim belief that is echoed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. The tradition of rights in the modern world is based on the fundamental natural rights of life, liberty, and property (the right to the pursuit of happiness, as presented by Thomas Jefferson, is essentially an argument for property rights). Any Muslim who murders, rapes, or steals is in violation of this 1400 year old tenet, which is based upon the Abrahamic tradition of stopping bloodshed, reducing theft, and preserving dignity.

A stumbling block for many Muslims is the problem of misbehavior on the part of despots and dictators throughout Muslim history. This can be addressed by making it clear that Muslims (in many cases) thrived in the past despite their political leaders, not because of them. The despicable Caliph who kills the innocent and destroys the productive elements of society did exist in Muslim history. Such Caliphs should be condemned and relegated as bad examples of Muslim governance. At the same time, it is helpful to point out that Muslims were much more advanced in promoting political freedom for the largest number of people over the largest area of land than any civilization that preceded Islamic civilization. The Greeks established an amazing democratic tradition that should be praised, but it was limited to a much smaller segment

of society when compared to the more general freedoms found in various manifestations of Islamic civilization. One should not try to argue whether the Greeks or the Muslims were better; rather, it is more useful to trace the influence of the Greeks on Muslim philosophy and governance, and the success and failure of Muslims who tried to reignite the Athenian democratic tradition.

A common mistake committed (sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally) by some Muslim interfaith speaker is the inability to connect Muslim practices and beliefs to their corresponding Christian practices and beliefs. For example, Muslims speak of fasting, wealth sharing, and recitation, while Christians speak of lent, the tithe, and hymns. The similarities and differences between such corollary practices is worth exploring.

When discussing terrorism, it is critical to share with the non-Muslim audience the great turmoil caused in Muslim society by the Khawarij and the Assassins. Muslims have been both the perpetrators of terrorism and the victims of terrorism. In the past, Muslims have been able to root out and eliminate the terrorists in their midst. Today, Muslims need to work with friends and allies to eliminate the terrorist threat, which leads to death and destruction among Muslims and non-Muslims at the same time.

Interfaith discussions have many advantages, one of which is the opportunity for non-Muslims to better understand the role of the Quran. The position of the Quran among Muslims is much more similar to the role of Jesus among Christians. A frequent misunderstanding among Muslims is evident in the assumption that the way most Muslims view the Quran is the same as the way that most Christians view the Bible. This is a mistaken viewpoint that is unfortunately spread by some ignorant imams and

misinformed sheikhs. Most Muslims revere the holy Quran, and do not assign divinity to Prophet Muhammad. Christians, to a large extent, assign divinity to Jesus, and assign the Bible a lower level of importance than that of Jesus. Many Christians will advocate that the way to the Lord is through Jesus. Muslims, however, will more likely advocate that the way to God is through following the Quran, and that Prophet Muhammad was the greatest exemplar of applying the Quran (not the other way around). Thus, when comparing the Quran to the Bible, many Muslims fall into the trap of misstated comparisons. It is much more accurate to say ‘We Muslims revere the Quran the way you revere Jesus’ than to say ‘We Muslims have the same relationship to the Quran that you Christians have to Jesus.’ A Christian will reject a biblical phrase, if it contradicts the Christian view of Jesus; whereas a Muslim will reject a Prophetic statement (hadith), if it contradicts the Quran. [Note that many Christians will reject the claim that Jesus and the Bible contradict each other; and many Muslims will reject the claim that the Quran and hadith contradict each other].

These and other suggestions will, with the grace of God and the wisdom that comes from experience, lead to more successful and fruitful interfaith dialogues. There is a great need for more Muslims to participate in interfaith discussions, while at the same time there is a great need to minimize some of the disastrous misstatements that some Muslim speakers engage in.