

Respect and Dialogue

Rabbi John S. Friedman

Judea Reform Congregation, Durham, North Carolina

Have you ever been forced to accept an unwanted hug? When I was a rabbinical student in Jerusalem in 1971, I used to visit the Western (Wailing) Wall on Shabbat mornings. The Wall, at that time, was not controlled by the ultra-Orthodox or *Haredim* as it is today, and all kinds of people would mill about the area. My visits were occasionally welcomed by a certain very large, full bearded, traditional fellow wearing a *shtreimel* (Eastern European style fur hat)...even in the summer. He would approach me with confidence, his arms opened wide, and call out “Yankелеh” (an affectionate Yiddish form of Jacob, my Hebrew name), and then he would embrace me strongly. These episodes must have seemed amusing to any witnesses because I am a small man, and he very nearly picked me up off the ground during the hug.

His hugs did not amuse me when I was getting one. In fact, I felt downright intruded upon. The man barely knew me! I understood the intention of his embraces, nonetheless. He confessed that he wished to express his “love” for me as a fellow Jew. That was only the icing on the cake, however. He hoped I would frequent his synagogue and gradually become part of his community. My Reform Judaism, or any kind other than his own, was simply inadequate, unworthy, unacceptable. I am sure you can understand that what this person felt for me was nothing like “love.”

Dr. Eugene March has evidently been in the trenches of interfaith dialogue long enough to understand. His assertion that one cannot enter into honest dialogue, while harboring the ambition to pull your partner off of his path and drag him over to your own, is a priceless insight. Interfaith dialogue depends entirely upon trust and relationship, and the minute your partner suspects an ulterior motive, an unlevel playing field, the dialogue is over.

When a person enters such a relationship with a conversionary agenda, she naturally assumes that her religion is the superior one because it holds a redemptive promise lacking in the faiths of her partners. If one sits at the dialogue table holding a position that treats other faiths as untrue, wrong, evil, or at best, inadequate, which the desire to convert someone implies, then the search for understanding, the noble goal of interfaith dialogue, will be elusive and the dialogue a waste of time.

Be that as it may, Christians should wear the tenets of their faith proudly. In dialogue, we seek to understand one another. I want to know exactly what draws participants to the teachings and traditions of their faiths. This requires candor in interfaith conversations. Isaiah challenges us to be a “light to the nations,” not to stand at the airport and proclaim the superiority of our faith over others. Isaiah is asking us to live in such a way that our lives will reflect well upon God and upon our faith communities. By all means, be proud of your faith when explaining it to others and, by inference, feel joyful for the satisfaction others express about their own practices and beliefs.

So far so good. A justification for mutual respect in interfaith relations based upon the nature of such dialogue is adequate and welcome. However, Dr. March heads off into territory that compromises his message. Our communities are indeed

more diverse than they were when our generation was growing up. Today we are exposed to “others” as our neighbors “once known to me only through books.” And what does our author bid us to learn from this new reality? That it was acceptable back then to champion the superiority of one’s religion over others when you did not have to look at so many of them in the face?

It would be sufficient to say that diversity has changed us and taught us a lesson about God’s work in the world. But Dr. March seems to assert that the lesson that preachers should learn and teach their people is that the old message will not work anymore in this “altered context.” This sounds to the non-Christian to be more of a strategy than a change of heart, and a change of heart is necessary if interfaith dialogue is to become more honest and fruitful.

I welcome Dr. March’s “tapestry” metaphor. Allow me to add one observation to that symbol. If God intended the diversity represented by the colors in this tapestry, we should be doing everything possible to keep them from running. The way to do that is to appreciate what God has created and recognize that we have so much to teach each other that it ill behooves us to cling to the greater truth of our faiths over those of others. If we insist on holding tight to our truer truth, we will wind up giving one another many uncomfortable and unwelcome hugs and learning nothing.