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Interfaith-dialogue has potential to change lives

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Faith & Values editor

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By taking a journey into another religious tradition, Catherine Eustis says, she didn't lose her faith, but rather gained one, at least in part.

"I've really been living in their shoes," the New Orleans Catholic said of her experiences with Turkish Muslims. "I also feel I have one foot (in Catholicism) and one in Islam."

"I'm not willing to throw away all my beliefs, but it makes me take a second look at them."

Her experiences began with teaching English to Turkish students in the area, continued with an interfaith trip to Turkey and evolved into service as founding president when Louisiana Muslims wanted to start an Atlas Interfaith Foundation chapter a few years ago.

"I thought that was really beautiful that they asked me, being a woman and being a Catholic," Eustis said.

Eustis' story demonstrates the unpredictability and life-changing potential of interfaith dialogue, a concept even religious leaders sometimes struggle to define as they talk about the need for conversations leading to understanding among those of various religious traditions.

At its best, such dialogue can lead to peace, friendships and cooperative efforts to minister to human needs, religious leaders say.

At its worst, they add, it can inflame persistent anger and mistrust when members of various faiths seek to exhort the superiority of their own religions over those of others.

"It is true that dialogue does carry some risk of participants getting offended as they encounter religious beliefs which differ from their own and challenge tenets they hold dear," said Glenn Hinson, a Kentucky religion professor coming to Baton Rouge this week. "This is why it is very important for all participants to have deep enough roots in their own tradition that they won't feel threatened when a person of a different faith tradition will present different views."

Hinson, a Baptist whose studies include interfaith dialogue, will serve as guest speaker for the annual community prayer breakfast, sponsored Thursday by the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues.

The federation is one of a number of Baton Rouge groups that promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation as a tool for improving the community.

Last week, the Working Interfaith Network celebrated 12 years of pulling together to tackle social justice issues in the community.

Last month, Atlas Interfaith brought Jews, Christians, Muslims and Buddhists together to break fast with a sundown dinner during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month.

Rabbi Stanton Zamek of Beth Shalom Synagogue spoke at the Islamic dinner, explaining that interfaith dialogue is more than just being nice to one another.

“It’s not just so we can get along better, though that’s a great thing,” he said. “It’s not just to satisfy curiosity.”

Rather, Zamek sees interfaith dialogue as a way to enrich his experience of his own faith.

For example, because of the importance of Jewish meditation traditions in his own religious practices, he is interested in the meditation approaches of Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus as well.

“A lot of times the goals are quite different, even so, my mediation practice has been enormously enriched by those encounters,” he said.

However, Zamek said the goal is not to create a new faith by combining parts of various other traditions.

“I’m not interested in making some kind of religious gumbo,” he said. “Easy blendings are not respectful of any of the traditions involved in doing that.”

Like Hinson, Zamek insists participants in religious dialogue need to understand their own traditions well.

“If I am secure, if I am grounded, I can reach out without fear I will fall over,” he said.

Zamek and Hinson also talked about the need to observe boundaries or guidelines in interfaith dialogue.

Those include approaching one another with mutual respect and not using the dialogue as an avenue for proselytizing.

“This is not the place for evangelism,” Hinson said. “Southern Baptists will find it hard, but if they want to enter into dialogue, they must give up the view that everybody who doesn’t know Jesus as they know Jesus is going to Hell.”

However, while interfaith dialogue may come easier for moderates of the various faiths, those who hold more conservative or fundamental views don’t have to be excluded, said the Rev. Jeff Day, a Southern Baptist who is retiring after 20 years as executive director of the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues.

His keys to dialogue include being able to listen with persistence and show mutual respect even in disagreement.

“We have to remember that religious liberty is a precious gift we have in this country,” he said. “What holds this country together is a common respect for our Constitution and a willingness to live together as citizens to make this republic endure.”

In his own ministry, Day has had to separate his role as a Christian preacher from that as executive director of the foundation.

“I was not called to be executive director to be an evangelist,” Day said, but that doesn’t mean he is precluded from talking about Jesus.

“I love to tell the story, but I’m not going to force the story on anyone,” he said.

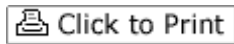
In his role as a leader in dialogue, he asks people “to put the best of their religious traditions on the table and see what we can do with it.

“My best is a belief in Jesus Christ, who is for me the ultimate manifestation of the love of God,” he said. “I expect my Jewish friends to be equally bold in their beliefs, and I expect my Muslim friends to be equally bold.”

Thich Dao Quang of the Tam Bao Buddhist Temple in Baton Rouge sounded a similar theme when he spoke at the Atlas Interfaith dinner. “I think we need to practice what we learn, not just from Buddah, but from all religions.”

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