Interfaith Should Not Be Sloppy: Start with these Four Basic Steps

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We live in a world in which affirming "interfaith" surrounds us like air. This vague sentiment has expanded exponentially in tandem with two surging platitudes-as-virtue from the past half-century, "don't judge," and "can't we all just get along."

This affirmation and profession of "interfaith" is good, but the facile donning of the sentiment without accountability or investment is not.

Most who profess to affirm the genuinely noble ideals of "interfaith" have little but occasional thoughts or work in the arena, and even fewer have any record of intentional reflection and activity in this enormously complex, urgently needed work in the world.

For some reason, even light, non-demanding expectations of so much as trifling investment and expertise in the complex rigors of "interfaith" are not put on the many who steadily presume to speak on the matter, or profess to advocate or care for it. People with little or no record of training nor consistent investment in the field, are somehow regularly given platforms to expound on this challenging and difficult work.

I can think of no other field where this is the norm. In absolutely every other arena of human labor or teaching, be it from the welder, to the flight attendant, from the auto mechanic to the surgeon, we retain a quiet, ever-there assumption that people whom we allow to pursue relevant purposes in their areas indeed are trained and experienced in their pursuits. Absent evidence of studied devotion and trials in their work, we tend to feel nervous and cautious about their claims. Yet somehow in the field of "interfaith," such expectations hardly ever obtain.

This is not to say we should deny aspirants, and those who express interest in the field our whole-hearted enthusiasm and encouragement. But why do we so readily give people with no record such access, even authority, over something so pressing, even with life and death ramifications as "interfaith." How about, "I truly feel that all phones should work properly. Here, give me your phone, and that little screw driver. I think I can see what's giving you the problem over here." Or, "something wrong with your eyes? Here, lemme give something a try." Really?

This peculiar quality of "interfaith" where any and every, good hearted soul is welcome to "give it a try" may iron itself out as the field matures, and its advocates and practitioners are increasingly expected to give evidence of qualifications and commitment. But in the mean time, here are four brief points of guidance for any who are currently, or newly discovering interest in this complex, extremely important, and eminently challenging arena:

Start with Definitions

Because "interfaith" is so important, and so much is at stake, any who plan really to invest in it, should pause, before all else, to define precisely, in universally accessible terms, just what it is you plan to do, (or speak on).

The words "interfaith," and "interreligious" are so broad, and so vague as to actually have no meaning at all unless they are further and more clearly defined. If we are so bold and to presume to advocate, or actually to bring people together, and place them in challenging and difficult environments where so much is at stake, we must do the work needed to be able to articulate outside of jargon, the purpose of the work, the dynamics presumed to support desired ends, and the hopes and dangers of involvement. Not doing so is irresponsible.

Establish Clear Purpose

To what end are we undertaking "interfaith" pursuits? What exactly are our goals? What do we hope to achieve? Why do we presume "interfaith" activity will support the pursuit of our purposes? How, and in what way (by what dynamic, and processes) will "Interfaith" serve our desired ends?

Is the positive contribution of "interfaith" to our desired ends measurable? Will we have ways to know if we are doing a good job? A bad job? "Interfaith" itself is not a purpose (without arguing for it as one). We must be able to explain just what it is we are trying to do, and why and how "interfaith" will aid and support the pursuit of our desired ends.

Define Your Parameters

This need describes both "religious" range, and the geographical extent. Is your project related to just two religions? Three? More? Is there a limit to how many religions should or can be involved? Why? Are there religions to be not included? What about denominations and sects *within* major religions? How will this thorny and recalcitrant matter be addressed by your work?

Another parameter is geographical range. Are you speaking of or proposing "interfaith" work for your neighborhood? Between two houses of worship in your neighborhood? In your city? The "world"? What are the differences when trying to work at these different levels? Is one harder, or better? How are these different levels interrelated. Can they serve and support each other? How?

Know Your Context

Finally, "interfaith" does not occur in a vacuum. "Interfaith" is integrally related to all areas of human striving, experience, and reality. It is impossible to to speak intelligently about "interfaith" without taking into account its "surroundings," its context.

What is the economic situation of the area you seek to reflect on or influence? Under what sort of political system do religious institutions and believers seek to carry out their religious and spiritual responsibilities? What is the religious freedom situation? What is the level of social stability? Human rights? Freedoms? What are social and cultural trends in the places of your investment? What is happening to religion itself?

All these factors have enormous impact on endeavors and advocacy in this area of "interfaith," which is so subtle, fragile, and complex. It is crucial to establish a growing and ever more clear grasp of the "environments" and contexts for "interfaith." Knowing and publicly defining these should precede presuming to speak or act on "interfaith" concerns.

In sum, when starting in on "interfaith," define what you think you mean more precisely. Understand and be able to communicate your purposes clearly and persuasively. Decide on the religious and geographical parameters of what you intend to take on. And finally, study well, the many aspects of the political, economic, social, and cultural environments in which your interfaith efforts are planned.

These four very basic, elementary, starting points cannot be overlooked by any sincere and serious person claiming to care for or represent familiarity with such work.

There is no greater nor more important arena in efforts for good in the world than "interfaith." The field deserves to be taken seriously, and work in it should proceed responsibly.