

# Voices: A pastor, an imam and a rabbi sit down at a bar ...

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On a Friday morning, I was seated at a restaurant bar, sharing breakfast with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim imam. Since I'm an evangelical pastor, you might be wondering if this is the set up for a rather terrible joke. But, no, it's actually what I was doing. Let me explain:



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I was participating in a peace conference in Abu Dhabi. At the invitation of Pastor [Bob Roberts](#) of [Glocalnet](#), Imam [Mohamed Magid](#) of the [International Interfaith Peace Corps](#) and [Sheikh Bin Bayyah](#) of the United Arab Emirates, 10 evangelical pastors, 10 rabbis and 10 imams were asked to gather and discuss religious freedom and tolerance in Muslim-majority nations and in the United States.

The sheikh is the primary force behind a document called the [Marrakesh Declaration](#)—a call for religious tolerance and peace in Muslim-majority nations. The document was finalized in January 2016, and participants at the peace conference hoped to find ways to incorporate the declaration into other Muslim-majority nations. Participants also were asked to find ways for us to incorporate similar thinking into our respective communities.

For three full days, we listened, probed, questioned, argued, discussed and workshopped some possibilities of constructive paths forward in a world that, for the foreseeable future, will be distinctly multi-faith.



We were treated to incredible hospitality—ranging from delicious food to gracious kindness, to top-notch accommodations—and saw the very best that Abu Dhabi had to offer. [Sheikh Hamza Yusuf](#) granted us impromptu lessons on the intricacies of Muslim history and culture; we tried all manner of fruit juices and a wide variety of dates—the fruit!—from across the Middle East; and we were treated as scholars and ambassadors from our respective religious traditions.

After the week, I walked away realizing we have some irreconcilable differences, and yet we also have a potential path forward, if we are to live together in peace. Here are my thoughts—from a Christian perspective:

## **Irreconcilable differences**

### *1. The Incarnation*

Christians believe Jesus is God in flesh. This is a non-negotiable, as we believe it is our path to communion with God. My Jewish friends find this in direct contradiction to the Shema, and my Muslim friends believe Jesus was a great prophet of Allah, but not God incarnate. There is no way to solve this theological conundrum.

### *2. The New Testament*

Christians believe the New Testament is the sacred text giving the pinnacle of revelation, because it conveys the life and work of Jesus. My Jewish friends believe the canon is closed outside of the Hebrew Bible, and my

Muslim friends will read the Gospels within the New Testament because of their reverence for Jesus, but they will not find them to be of the same level as the Quran.

### *3. Grace through faith*

Christians believe we have right standing and relationship with God through no religious efforts of our own, but through grace that is transmitted by the finished work of Jesus. We receive this by placing our faith in Jesus, but not through our religious work. My Jewish friends believe God's righteousness is transmitted through either keeping the Law or by their innate Jewishness. This is my best understanding—please correct me if I am off-base here, rabbis. My Muslim friends believe God's righteousness is transmitted through keeping the Five Pillars of Islam. In both Judaism and Islam, there is a direct connection between our actions and our reception of righteousness. The concept of salvific grace, as presented in the New Testament, is unique to Christianity.

After the theological conversations I had, there was certainly very little—read: no—possibility any of the rabbis, imams or pastors were planning to convert to another religion. Each of us has our reasons for believing our particular path to God is the correct one. From a theological perspective, many of us believe the others are condemned to a future apart from God, yet we couldn't help but love one another.

In fact, I would say I have dozens of new friends. Nevertheless, I plan to remain a Christian, even though I love my new rabbi and imam friends—and look forward to taking them up on their offered hospitality in their respective cities.

### **The way forward**

What is the multi-faith future? What does it look like when Muslims, Jews, and Christians decide we must retain our religious identities in the

future? If our theologies are, in fact, not merely different paths to God, but are instead different theologies in which no more than one of us is correct, we must find a way to co-exist in a manner where we can foster the common good.

Based on that recognition, I began to imagine the way forward for us in the United States—and perhaps globally—will most likely look something like this:

### *1. Minimize differences*

I don't mean we ignore differences. I mean we don't focus on them. If I focus only our differences, I will never be able to work with someone who is different than me. If we are going to forge a path of the common good, then we must look beyond our differences toward something that we can agree upon.

That thing, I believe, is a human society with the goal of flourishing. The problem, of course, is that each of the representative religious traditions will have a variety of ways to define "flourishing." We are, as it were, back to our differences. So, we must not only focus on flourishing, but we must do so in a way that does not focus on the differences between those traditions and their respective definitions.

### *2. Maximize common ground*

We must, instead, find the common values and virtues that are the outworkings of our faiths and use those as building blocks for societies that will be receptive to peace and religious freedom.

Over three days I spotted a few common values and virtues:

- Respect: Each of the groups mentioned a desire to welcome all people into a healthy society, giving them a voice free from persecution at the

hands of the government.

- Freedom: All groups agreed individuals ought to be free to worship without fear of government persecution or reprisal.
- Social justice/sanctity of life: All groups agreed their texts emphasize the sanctity of human life—in various ways—and that ought to be highlighted in public policy toward the impoverished, the outcast, the unemployed and the unborn.
- Marriage: Marriage is valued by all groups and ought to be fostered within society, as healthy families create deeper peace.
- Peace: All representatives sought a world where there was not only an absence of conflict, but also a true working to help individuals grow toward success.
- Education: Part of success is educating. All groups value education, and all groups have their own internal education systems ensuring their values are taught to their adherents.

I am certain there are more, but these values jumped out at me as we discussed our dreams for the future.

### *3. Build a moral vision.*

With common values and virtues, I think the three monotheistic Abrahamic faiths could potentially construct and present a moral vision that would be helpful in imagining jurisprudence, educational values, social services and the like in Muslim-majority states.

Furthermore, I believe such a common moral vision could be of great benefit in the West, specifically in the United States. As our nation becomes increasingly tribal in its thinking and behavior, we must seek out places of agreement, even among those who have deep and irreconcilable

differences.

I would argue, in fact, that among those who have deep and irreconcilable theological differences, the moral vision must be born. People of faith care deeply about the moral structure and direction of societies, so it must be among those same people of faith that the moral vision ought to be forged, precisely because they care so deeply about the moral structure and direction of society.

To reiterate, this will not be a unified theological vision—such a vision is impossible in a multi-faith world—but it will instead be a moral vision that builds upon areas of commonality from the distinct theological traditions each faith brings to the table.

If we can, indeed, craft such a moral vision, there may be a path forward for civic life in the West—and beyond. If not? I do not know how long a solely secular civic philosophy can carry the weight of a society slowly fracturing into self-absorbed interest groups.

Can such a moral vision be created? God alone knows. But after my time with my new friends, I am convinced that if we do not push for the common good, the forces of division will win the day. I pray we will work together, despite our theological differences, find a common moral vision, and create a world that will be stable and peaceful for future generations.

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