



The Interfaith Union for Progressive Religion

Minister's Message

Rev. David E. McClean



On What is Called “Interfaith”

First in a Series

The questions “What is interfaith?” and “What is an interfaith minister?” will likely keep coming up. Here are my answers to those questions.

“Interfaith” is a word for an *ethic of engagement* with other religious ideas and traditions. That ethic is composed of *at least* two virtues: magnanimity and humility. Note that I did not say that one of the virtues is “tolerance.” “Tolerance” can mean “to abide with repugnance.” One tolerates what one finds odious, or at least unpleasant or distasteful. (With rare exception, one never talks about *tolerating* sex or good food.) Magnanimity, on the other hand, is the virtue of one who is great-souled, one who cheerfully seeks to make room for the Other as Other, even if effort is required to do so. In fact, the word is derived from two Latin words: “*magna*,” meaning “great” or “large” or “expansive,” and “*anima*,” meaning “soul.” The magnanimous person is one who is big enough to directly engage with others, face to face – listening to their stories, their fears, their views. The magnanimous person must, therefore, think the Other *worthy* – at least as worthy as herself. Synonyms for “magnanimous” are “generous,” “high-minded” and “fair.” Being “fair” entails giving the Other his or her due. Some antonyms of “magnanimous” are “petty,” “small” and “narrow.”

The second virtue is “humility.” The antonym of “humility” is “arrogance.” Now, a cognate of “arrogance” is “*arrogate*.” The arrogant person *arrogates*, and it is noteworthy indeed what “to arrogate” means. It means “*to claim unwarrantably or presumptuously; assume or appropriate to oneself without right.*” This is why the virtue of humility is, in my view, one of the important virtues of the interfaith perspective. For the things of faith – the things which are the object of religion – belong to no one person, no one community, and no one tradition. God (the Tao, etc.), however conceived, “belongs” to no one. Over the millennia, we have learned how disastrous it has been to believe otherwise.

So interfaith, for those who see the value in it, is not a special “kind of religion,” it is something that *regulates* the approach to religion, even our own religion. It is not a desire to simply added pieces of other traditions to one’s own, as a cultural dilettante adds pieces of various cultures, understanding each only superficially. It is an ethic, the virtues of which allow for a fair hearing of other points of view on matters of faith or religion. The interfaith perspective is a perspective that allows one to do more than “tolerate” another, but requires openness to an exchange of ideas. One can be deeply rooted in a particular tradition and still proclaim oneself as holding to an interfaith perspective. There are many examples of such people, including Abraham Joshua Heschel, M.K. Gandhi and Thomas Merton. Further, the ethic that is interfaith does not preclude rejecting ideas and propositions of other traditions. But it conditions that



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rejection so as to pull back from utter condemnation, save for in those cases where that which is rejected is almost universally or in fact universally abhorrent.

The interfaith minister, therefore, is not someone who is a minister of the “interfaith tradition.” He or she is one who holds to a particular tradition (which may already be influenced, of course, by other traditions), and holds to that particular tradition with the employment of the ethic of interfaith. Thomas Merton, for example, was a deeply committed Catholic monk of the Cistercian order, yet he found various schools of Buddhism very compelling and useful, even employing them in ways that allowed him to deepen his Catholic commitments because those schools of Buddhism gave him fresh vocabularies and concepts with which to think about ideas he had been exploring for years. He even explored and employed the ideas of non-religious thinkers – without fear or consternation, understanding that all of us are in different places on the various roads of life.

But “interfaith” can raise questions about the nature of our commitments to our own faith traditions. This will be the subject of the next message in this series.

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