


# Why *Evangelicals* and the *Interfaith* *Movement* Need Each Other

BY CHRIS HEUERTZ AND BETH KATZ




An openness seems to be growing in this generation of evangelical Christians that is redefining how evangelicals understand and participate in today's interfaith movement.

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Perhaps this openness reflects a sense on the part of some evangelicals that involving themselves in interfaith activities ultimately will lead them to a more authentic relationship with God. Perhaps it has to do with an emerging, internal evangelical sense of disillusionment echoed in Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons' recent book, *unChristian*. The authors suggest that evangelical Christianity has an image problem—namely, that it is, among other things, anti-gay, too political and judgmental, and generally out of touch with contemporary mainstream society.

Chris Heuertz, an evangelical who directs an international Christian missional movement serving among the poorest of the world's poor, and Beth Katz, a practicing Jew who founded Project Interfaith, a dynamic interfaith organization devoted to promoting a deeper understanding of religious diversity, discuss evangelical Christians and their involvement in the interfaith movement.



Beth Katz: Tell me a bit about your upbringing as an evangelical and how you understood interfaith work growing up.

Chris Heuertz: I grew up with a fairly conservative evangelical religious experience, where interfaith dialogue was generally viewed with suspicion. In my experience, most evangelicals approached interfaith interactions in one of three ways. Some approached it fearfully, afraid the outcome was supposed to be a melded form of a synchronized, common version of God. Others understood it defensively, viewing such conversations as an assault on orthodoxy. And some entered it with a persuasive mission, using interfaith discussions as a platform to try to convince others that Christianity is the one and only true faith. These three misconceptions really limited any meaningful interfaith exchanges in my formative religious years.

Beth: I must admit, until my role as director of Project Interfaith, my interactions with the evangelical Christian community had been largely limited to being the subject of proselytizing. As a result of this, I, like many others, tended to view the evangelical community as monolithic and predatory, often creating relationships with non-evangelicals only for the sake of one day converting them.

One of the questions I encounter most frequently is, “How do you deal with all those evangelical Christians?” And the truth is that I usually don’t. Not because I don’t welcome their involvement, but because, for the most part, evangelical Christians are absent from interfaith activity—which makes sense, given the healthy dose of suspicion you just described that is present in the evangelical community about interfaith work. And to be fair, I think the interfaith movement has its own suspicions about working with evangelicals and has not done a great job of articulating why evangelicals should be part of the interfaith movement.

Chris: There is even an evangelical mistrust of ourselves. There are lots of doctrinal disputes and competing views of how people see other Christian adherents outside evangelicalism.

Beth: And there are so many misperceptions about what interfaith work is. Many people still equate it with gathering a bunch of people from different religions to sit down together and share their deeply held beliefs. This model is limited because many people are simply not interested in or comfortable with participating in something so intimate. That is why we are trying to redefine and expand the definition of what it means to be in dialogue with someone from a different religious tradition (or even from their own tradition).

Project Interfaith offers a diverse array of programs, including trainings, study circles and workshops, to provide the public with opportunities to dialogue to the degree and depth that they are comfortable. We recognize that, for some people, visiting a place of worship that is not their own pushes them to the edge of their comfort zone and provides a tremendous learning opportunity. So we offer an interfaith architecture tour that brings participants to Hindu temples, Jewish synagogues and Catholic cathedrals, as well as other places of worship.

But we also realize people are looking for opportunities to discuss more theologically meaty aspects of interfaith relations. For those individuals, we offer programs such as our Jewish-Christian Study Circle and workshops with nationally recognized religious scholars.

Chris: What do you say to people who are concerned that interfaith dialogue will weaken or dilute one’s faith?

Beth: Over the years, there has been so much assimilation in this country that now people want to reclaim and preserve what makes their religious beliefs distinct. But the last thing


Project Interfaith is trying to do is boil down all our respective faiths to a core, indistinguishable set of beliefs. In the early years of the interfaith movement there was, at times, an overemphasis on commonality and agreement that minimized or even sacrificed many of the distinctions central to each religious tradition. However, one of the main lessons interfaith organizers have learned from the past 40 years is that the key ingredient to creating healthy, meaningful relations is to build trust and respect, not necessarily agreement, among individuals.

In order to fully participate in interfaith experiences, one must have a solid understanding of her or his own beliefs and religious tradition. While interfaith interactions often cause people to reflect on and sometimes question their own beliefs, these experiences also

Christian tradition. In fact, it's likely that most evangelicals wouldn't be able to clearly articulate what distinguishes them from other Christians. Interfaith dialogue provides the perfect platform in which this process can be worked out.

For me personally, entering interfaith dialogue has forced me to figure out what it is within the evangelical tradition that I actually hold central to my own faith. My involvement with interfaith work also has challenged me to identify what unique qualities and beliefs evangelicals share and how these relate to Christianity as a whole and to the larger community of faiths.

Beth: What do you see as being the unique contributions evangelicals can bring to the interfaith movement?



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frequently lead individuals to develop a deeper understanding of their own religious identities.

Chris: Participation in the interfaith movement creates an opportunity for evangelicals to better understand our own beliefs. For example, the Bebbington Quadrilateral (a commonly accepted framing of the modern evangelical tradition) defines the evangelical movement as having four foundational components: 1) biblical, holding to a high view of Scripture; 2) crucicentric, keeping the cross of Jesus Christ as the critical center of its beliefs; 3) conversionist, affirming a call to acceptance of Christ and His teachings as a basis for conversion; and 4) evangelistic, compelling its followers to share their faith and make disciples.

Though affirming these four central convictions is at the heart of evangelical Christianity, many still struggle to define what exactly it means to be an evangelical within the

Chris: Evangelicalism at its best offers an affirmation of the personal nearness of God in the intimate parts of the everyday, a celebration of Scripture through frequent readings and memorization for practical use, a diversity of forms of worship with local autonomy in forming its various expressions, and a view of grace that is accessible and available in radical ways.

I also think evangelicals who are involved in interfaith dialogue can help dispel the stereotypes that exist about us and reveal the diversity that exists within our tradition. At the first Project Interfaith Advisory Council meeting I attended, the other council members asked me if people like Pat Robertson, the late Jerry Falwell and James Dobson were evangelical. Though these Christian leaders have become caricature parodies of what the religious right embodies, they do not represent the larger evangelical community in the United States. But those outside the evangelical community will



only know this if we are engaged in larger issues such as the interfaith movement.

However, I know evangelicals haven't always been the easiest to work with in such conversations. Even in my own experience, many evangelicals validate the stereotypes and come across as arrogant in these settings. I'm sure many have tried to hijack the interfaith dialogue movement as an opportunity to evangelize.

**Beth:** I do think one of the main reasons evangelicals have not been more involved is that many of us have been reluctant to put energy into courting evangelical partnerships out of the fear that if they do become involved, it is ultimately driven from a desire to proselytize.

More and more, I am meeting evangelicals who do not understand the conversionist

than merely live or work next to someone of a different faith, but to build a relationship with them. Cultivating these relationships allows us to appreciate both the universal and unique aspects of our religious traditions as well as the tremendous diversity in belief and customs that exists within each religious tradition.

**Chris:** The evangelical tradition does offer an invitation to an encounter with Christ, but allowing that to be a driving agenda toward conversion commodifies people. However, it is possible for evangelicals to engage in dialogue without feeling like they compromise on this yearning to share their faith with others.

Learning to properly embrace the evangelical commitment to mission, while simultaneously bearing witness to the values


“Participation in the interfaith movement allows evangelicals to better understand our own beliefs.” —Chris Heuertz

component inherent in evangelical Christianity as meaning that they must convert others at all costs. But I have encountered evangelicals who do see interfaith interactions as a vehicle to proselytize. That is a shame, because they are missing out on an opportunity to better understand the world in which we live and work as well as their own faith. We are not asking evangelicals to give up being evangelicals. At the same time, we would like them to come into interfaith experiences with respect for non-Christians and a willingness to try to understand why others believe what we do.

Open, honest interfaith encounters demand that one develop a strong understanding of one's own religious identity as well as educate oneself about the beliefs of others. It calls us to do more

embodied in Christ to honor all humanity as loved by God, helps evangelicals gain credibility. This will allow evangelicals to explore the gift of their own faith tradition as they discover more of its uniqueness and beauty.

**Beth:** Understanding one's faith identity, while at the same time learning about and respecting the beliefs of others, is a challenge with which people of all faiths who live in a pluralistic society such as the United States struggle.

I have found that interfaith work provides infinite opportunities to learn more about oneself and others. Having been involved in interfaith work for more than 10 years, I am continually growing as a person of faith and as a professional in the interfaith movement. 

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