

**By Mindelle Jacobs**

Religious officials are currently meeting in Italy to figure out a refined way to delicately suggest to non-Christians that their beliefs are inferior.

Well, the Vatican and the World Council of Churches (WCC) wouldn't put it quite like that. They say they've launched a three-year project to develop a "shared code of conduct" on the touchy issue of conversion.

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"We hope that at the end of this study project, we will be able to propose a code of conduct that will affirm that commitment to our faith never translates into denigration of the other."

The Vatican and the WCC, an umbrella group for hundreds of mainstream Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches, hope to find an acceptable middle ground between demonstrating one's faith and aggressive proselytism.

Members of other religious groups, including Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and Muslims, are also expected to participate in the discussions.

All I can say is 'oy vey.' Interfaith dialogue is great. It helps heal old wounds, dispels myths and fosters understanding.

Anything that breaks down some of our seemingly innate, fear-of-the-other tribalism is welcome.

But if Christians are worried about offending people while looking for converts, there's a simple solution: stop proselytizing.

It annoys a heck of a lot of people.

I realize making such a plea is like spitting into the wind. Christianity is based on the notion of spreading the gospel. It's just that, as a Jew, I've always had difficulty swallowing such an approach.

Jews don't go out looking for converts, although, God knows, we're so outnumbered we could use some more. Kabbalah may be cool these days, but there's more to Jewish mysticism and Judaism than sporting a red string bracelet, a la Madonna.

So I view the attempt by the Vatican and the WCC to put a positive spin on conversion with a mixture of amusement and irritation. You can dress it up, but proselytism is still an ugly concept.

Bernie Farber, CEO of the Canadian Jewish Congress, is less rattled than I am over the issue.

"I don't think we can ever get away from Christianity not wanting to spread the word of Jesus. That's what Christianity is all about," he says.

"The real problem has been how they've done it over the centuries," he adds. "If they're now going to go about trying ... to do such a thing without causing the kind of intolerance and pain that's been caused, especially to our community, that's probably not a bad thing."

On the other hand, Farber seethes over the Jews for Jesus group, which distorts religious tenets to woo Jewish converts.

He's right that the name of the group is a ridiculous misnomer. "It's like vegetarians for meat," he quips.

Ron Banerjee, director of the Hindu Conference of Canada, dismisses the plan by Christian churches to draw up guidelines on conversion as nonsense.

"We don't approve of conversion, period. We don't think that there is a polite way of doing it," he says.

"They're trying to find a very sophisticated and a very nice-looking knife with which to slit our throats."

The code-of-conduct project is simply an attempt to sugar-coat an unacceptable practice, Banerjee adds.

The World Evangelical Alliance, a parallel group to the WCC, is also reviewing how to share faith without offending people, says Geoff Tunnicliffe, director of global initiatives for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

"It's something very much on our radar," he says. "It's about respect and it's about the integrity of your message."

The movement has developed "best practices" around conversion so it's not viewed as coercive, he says.

Respect for diversity and evangelism are very strange bedfellows, indeed.

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