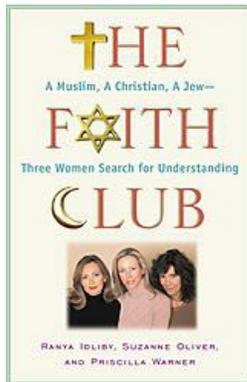


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The Faith Club — A Postmodern Parable

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Want to join a Faith Club? A trio of women in New York City have established a group they call the Faith Club as an effort toward interfaith relations at the most personal level.

As reporter Cathy Lynn Grossman of USA Today explains, “This New York City trio is out to share with a fractious world their way of fostering interreligious understanding soul to soul.”

More:

When the news abounds with incendiary stereotypes, contradictory theologies and confusing cultural identities, can any ordinary person sort it all out?

Yes, if they're bold, persistent and open-minded, say the three women of the Faith Club: Ranya Idris, a Muslim; Suzanne Oliver, a Christian; and Priscilla Warner, a Jew.

The three women started meeting together shortly after 9/11 and sought to understand one another. Now, they have written a memoir of their experiences entitled Faith Club.

More from USA Today:

Gathered in Oliver's apartment to talk about their experience, they're easy, laughing, finishing one another's thoughts and bolstering one another's ideas, munching their favorite snacks, such as Warner's addictive gourmet chocolates.

But The Faith Club reveals how very hard it was when they were spiritual strangers learning to lay down their guards and dredge up their deepest fears and prejudices.

Through it all, they found insight into one another's beliefs and greater clarity in their own.

This is not what the three mothers imagined when they met in 2002. Back then, still reeling from 9/11, they set out to create a children's book centered on the common ties and tales of the Christians, Jews and Muslims who all link back to the biblical patriarch Abraham.

They finished the children's book, but publishers were more interested in the mothers' challenging — and enduring — relationships. What emerged was The Faith Club and a guide for forming similar groups.

Here is the most interesting part of the article:

Everywhere they go, people who already have heard of the book say they want to start their own clubs.

There are stumbling blocks, however. Will everyone be as open, as bold, as willing to press on with these women's mantra of absolute honesty, constantly asking one another, “What do you really think?”

For anyone who reads the Quran or the Bible literally, rather than metaphorically or in cultural context, the women

say, their views will be too liberal. For people who believe there is exactly one way to one heaven, described and delineated only by their own faith, The Faith Club may not offer a template.

So there is nothing so new here after all. The central weakness of most interfaith dialogue groups is that the wrong people show up. The more orthodox believers in all groups tend to be less interested in circular discussions of faith based mostly on feelings. The more liberal folk love these groups, councils, and coffee meetings.

The only interfaith dialogue worth having would involve orthodox believers of various belief systems — not the moderates and liberals. The more liberal members hold to such a plastic concept of religious truth that conflict with other groups is translated into etiquette rather than a true exchange of convictions. Liberal Christians, liberal Jews, and liberal Muslims have little ground for serious disagreement. Instead, it's all a matter of respecting each other's traditions and ceremonies.

When the exclusivity of the Gospel is denied from the onset, the "Christianity" that shows up at the dialogue is not classical biblical Christianity.

Conflicts over theological conviction should be at the level of honest debate, not physical violence. We should seek a responsible means of speaking about our deepest convictions. But we cannot hold a true conversation if we hold to watered-down forms of conviction.

The Faith Club is a postmodern parable for our times.

