



Words, not Weapons

By Richard W. Rahn

CHANGING MINDS THROUGH DIALOGUE IS THE AMERICAN WAY

Most people who have reached a certain age have changed their minds about something or someone that they firmly believed in the past. Many of the real conflicts in society, including hate-driven mass shootings, result from people who fail to acknowledge, even to themselves, that they could be wrong.

America, more than most places, has been largely free of violent conflicts within or between religious groups. There were a few exceptions, such as the Salem witch trials (which occurred before the country was created) and some limited violence surrounding the early Mormons. But all in all, America has avoided the religious wars that caused so much destruction in Europe in centuries past and are the source of so much conflict in the Middle East today.

Many religions teach that theirs is the only way to salvation, and that followers of others may well end up in hell. There exist thousands of variants of Christianity in the United States, and clearly not all can be right in every doctrinal detail, though they share belief in Christ. The reason most Americans are tolerant and get along despite their many religious differences is that most

implicitly understand that they will lose if they try to take violent action against others with whom they disagree.

The American Founders were not all that far away in time from the European religious wars, and were very sensitive to the danger that the new country they were creating could fail as a result of religious conflict. It is worth repeating the First Amendment to the Constitution, which so many seem to have forgotten, both in its intent and history: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peacefully assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Yet today, we see some subset of Muslims who think they can take action against the rest because they are unable to acknowledge that they could be wrong in their beliefs. We see the effort of many in colleges to shut down the free speech of those they disagree with. We see the effort of some to shut down media whose messages they reject. And we see the efforts of some, often on college campuses, to keep people from assembling in peaceful groups, because they disagree with them. All of this comes from a failure to admit, "I may be wrong," and without such understanding, a civil society cannot exist.

Among some, global warming has become a religion rather than a science. They speak with great certainty about things they cannot possibly know, because of the immense number of variables, or in the words of F.A. Hayek, they suffer a fatal conceit (as did the early Bolsheviks). There is a natural human tendency to treat variables as constants — because it makes thinking so much easier. Rather than argue with evidence and logic, some of those who have turned climate science into a religion and some state attorneys general with a political agenda are trying to use the courts to shut down those who have different views.

This past Saturday in The Wall Street Journal, there was a marvelous story about a French billionaire, Mohed Altrad, who was born under difficult circumstances in a Syrian

village. He recounts that he grew up with "ideas that are not necessarily correct." He was taught that you have to kill Jews whenever you find them, but then he went to France and found himself becoming friends with Jewish students at the university. He was able to say to himself that he could be wrong about some of the things he believed when he was 16 or 17. "But I had a chance to understand: If I want to live and stay in France, it is not France that is going to change for me — I have to change." He totally assimilated and became a modern and distinguished French European.

Many of our ancestors in America quickly assimilated, not because it was easy — learning a new language and culture is difficult — but because they understood that the countries they were fleeing lacked freedom of thought and action, and economic opportunity could be found in America. The United States has a vested interest in immigrants who want to be Americans, accept the principles upon which it was founded, and work hard, including Muslims, Mexicans and others. Opportunity awaits those who are able to say publicly and with good conscience that the religious and other teachings they grew up with "may be wrong," and who can state, "I am prepared to live and work with, be friends with, and not try to harm others who may not share the beliefs I was taught."

It is good to argue for the ideals and principles one believes in. Trouble begins when one cannot acknowledge that others have a perfect right to argue for their point of view, no matter how wrongheaded we might think it is. Because all of us have been wrong about something at times, we need to grant the right for others to be wrong — provided they do not act to hurt our person or property.

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