

When Society Seeks Unity: Religious Pluralism

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To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people. It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes. All people are members of the same body, created from one essence. If fate brings suffering to one member, the others cannot stay at rest.

Saadi (ca. 1184–1292, one of the greatest figures of Persian ethical and humanitarian literature. During the troubled period of the Mongol rule and the fall of Baghdad he taught the mystical discipline of Sufism.)

WELCOME/LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Welcome to First Universalist Unitarian Church, where we recognize the Universal Kinship of all humanity and all beings. As we light our chalice today, let us ask ourselves: “From where does this flame arise?” It rises from another time, another place. And then, as it passes thru us, it both kindles our ready wicks, and picks up new energy, gathering the sparks of our collected life experience, and the warm glow of our being together. May this eternal flame remind us that grateful people of every age and every land have responded in their own way to the mystery and goodness in life.

So may it be for us a flame of universal kinship. May it remind us to honor those who serve the mystery in countless forms. Whether we affirm their beliefs and their traditions, or not, let us be reminded of our common humanity and our common destiny on this planet together.

Today may this flame honor those who celebrate Ramadan. Ramadan commemorates the first revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad. Muslims around the world take time this month to attend to their relationship with God and to the needs of others, through fasting and prayer.

OPENING WORDS

I will offer the traditional Muslim greeting, and you may respond with the traditional response. I will say “Salaam alaikum,” and you may respond, “Alaikum salaam.” It is a greeting of goodwill. It means peace be with you (both ways). When those of us who are not Muslim say it, it feels awkward, maybe forced. We probably pronounce it wrong. But it means the same thing.

I will say “Salaam Alaikum,” and you may respond, “Alaikum Salaam.” Or you may choose not to. You might not like these choices. But I think that's all we've got: stumbling forward into learning and understanding. Or not.

Salaam Alaikum.

Our gathering hymn is no less awkward. The tune is unfamiliar. The words will make you want to pause to ask, “Do I really believe this stuff?” I suggest that you put yourself fully into the jihad, the struggle through confusion. And before the day is out you'll have the chance to ask whether you really believe any of this stuff.

GATHERING HYMN *No Matter If You Live Now Far or Near* #181

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Once there was a town where the people were squabbling. They squabbled about the different ways that they preferred to talk, or dress, or commune with nature, or say thank you to God for all the good things in their lives. They even complained to God about these differences and asked God for help in getting others to see the truth. So God decided to step in.

She went to the edge of town. Well, people noticed her right away. I mean, she was astonishing garbed in amazing flowing robes. No one could take their eyes off her. And God walked right down the middle of the main street and everyone just stared and tried to take it all in.

And then just like that she disappeared again. At first the people were all excited and talking together about what they'd seen. But then it became evident that the people on the east side of town were going on and on about God's beautiful red hat, and those on the west side of town were talking about her beautiful blue hat. And they started arguing again. I mean arguing fiercely because they had seen it with their own eyes, after all, they should know what color the hat was.

And day after day and week after week they argued, and then started throwing insults from one side of the street to the other. Family members who had been on opposite sides of the street the day God came wouldn't even talk to each other. Eventually they built a fence down the middle of the street, and then when the rocks started flying back and forth they built the fence higher into a wall. And each side built up new stories and traditions and celebrations related to the day that God came to town. And the wall grew higher and higher.

Then one day a stranger came to town. Everyone noticed her at the edge of town. For a minute they thought they hoped that it was God again come to smite the people on the other side of the wall. Well it wasn't God, but once again all eyes were on this amazing figure who had the courage to walk at the very top of that wall, looking curiously at both sides.

"Get down here," both sides yelled to her. "The people on the other side are wicked, and stupid, and dangerous . . . you don't want to fall over *there*. Get down, aren't you afraid of how they dress and read and build their wrong-colored houses for God?" So finally the stranger stopped, and looked at all of them, and did something that surprised them even more: she sang them a song.

["I Ain't Afraid," by Holly Near, a jazzy but forceful statement including the lyric: "I ain't afraid of your Bible, I ain't afraid of your Torah, I ain't afraid of your Qur'an, but I'm afraid of what you do in the name of your God," etc.]

Well, the power of that song and the stranger's courage knocked those high walls right down to the street. And the people could really see each other again. And that was God's cue. She thanked the stranger and headed back the way she came (allowing people to see the color on the other side of her hat). And the stranger led the children to their classrooms, where they would learn to be so courageous themselves.

OFFERING

“By no means shall you attain righteousness unless you give freely from that which you love. And whatever you give, Allah knows it well” (Qur’an 3:92).

MEDITATION

Religions throughout time, from the least sophisticated to those with the most highly developed theologies, acknowledge that the human experience is one of exile, an experience of being cut off from some source of power or goodness or hope. Over and over in our daily lives, in our struggle to survive, or to achieve, or to love — over and over we feel exiled, cut off, or forgetting.

What will bring us back? What will initiate in us the effort to see through the struggle, to pursue the elusive connection, the lost love, the dim hope, the severed link?

For many of us the answer is NOT religion. We find in religion nothing but hypocrisy. And yet we yearn to return or connect or find a window which is neither too dark nor too bright for the eyes we bring to this quest.

[The longing melody of “By the Waters of Babylon”]

“Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still shall I know you, my Beloved.”

The mysterious one, known to Sufi mystics simply as “the beloved” is there always, not far away or invisible, but hidden in plain sight, shrouded only by the narrowness of our minds — when we are unable to see through the tumbling clouds, the brightly embroidered meadows.

“Close and intimate, Beloved, you are in morning which flames the mountain. You gladden the whole earth and make every heart grateful. You are the breathing of the world.”

Oh brings us back from exile. Come: in the touch of a hand. The last falling leaf. The sound of water over rocks. A hammer on the strings. An offer of a second chance. An open door. Come with the laugh of a child. And a smile on the lips of someone who doesn't look at all like me, a smile which says that appearances do not matter.

[more “By the Waters of Babylon”]

MESSAGE

Jehovah’s Witnesses once left me some literature describing their hope for the future in which everyone on earth would live in peace. I couldn’t argue with that hopeful vision. Their tract said that if everyone would just agree to their simple principles, we could all live in peace. They may be right. Of course if everybody agreed with al Qaeda’s point of view we might all live in peace too. Or if everyone agreed with George W. or with Ariel Sharon.

But we can’t run the world on “what ifs” like, “what if everyone would just agree on x, y, or z.” Because we can’t all agree on anything. I don’t think that’s a statement of pessimism. I do

believe that there is hope for peace. Probably not universal peace, but long outbreaks of peace which spread unpredictably.

There will arise again and again social experiments with democracy, tolerance, and religious pluralism, just as there have been in the past. In the 3rd century BCE, Emperor Asoka of India issued the edict: "The King, beloved of the gods, honors every form of religious faith . . . [for] the substance of religion [is] to revere one's own faith and never to revile the faith of others." This edict was taken seriously in the area now known as Kashmir, where Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists for a time wove a rich tapestry of mutual respect. In fact, the word, "Kashmiriyat" was coined to mean: "We all have different religions, but we live in peace in Kashmir."

Later, the Iberian peninsula, now Spain, was ruled by the Moors from shortly after the time of Muhammad until the Christian Inquisition of 1492 when the Jews were expelled and Muslims forced to convert. This period is known for a flowering of culture and religious toleration.

A bit to the east, in Transylvania: In 1568 King John Sigismund, the only Unitarian monarch in history, declared that "In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel, each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well; if not, no one shall compel them, for their souls would not be satisfied. But they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teachings they approve." This edict further proclaimed that no one in authority in Transylvania would be permitted to "annoy or abuse" anyone on account of religion. The basis for this edict was the affirmation that "faith is the gift of God" not the business of the state.

Then across the Atlantic: the First Amendment to the Constitution of the newly formed United States of America proclaimed that Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, nor prevent the free exercise thereof. And in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights made religious freedom a planetary imperative.

Like the Jehovah's Witness tract, religious freedom, or tolerance, or pluralism are nice ideals. But how are we actually doing? Is the expanding global religious pluralism uniting us or tearing us apart?

In the Netherlands this fall when a Muslim woman publicly criticized Islam for being misogynistic, she was first condemned by the left for being intolerant. Later she received death threats from Muslims.

In the Middle East, a recent public opinion poll shows that most view the United States unfavorably (87 percent of Saudis, for example). Not for democracy, personal freedoms, and women's rights, but for our foreign policy.

In Kashmir the nuclear standoff continues between American allies India and Pakistan. It would be simplistic to say that this is a war over religion since there are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan. It may be more like a religion vs. secular war since Pakistan is officially a Muslim government, whereas India is an explicitly secular democracy.

And in Nigeria this week Christians and Muslims are killing one another over a beauty pageant and perceived religious insults. We've watched this kind of thing from a distance for decades and are now perilously close to engaging in it ourselves. And while we are distracted, a huge tanker of oil is despoiling the coast of Spain.

But we don't have to look overseas for distracting, aggravating challenges to religious pluralism. A Muslim chaplain at Wisconsin's Dodge Correctional Institute was removed from a clergy group last month after members adopted a Christians-only policy.

Now of course that private clergy group has the right to set such boundaries on its own identity. And questions about religious diversity and tolerance must eventually get around to boundaries. After all, is there no one, as the song says, no one that we count outside? Are we even going to tolerate intolerance?

Are we going to affirm and promote the work of Osama bin Laden or the KKK (who are marching this weekend in Milwaukee)? Are we going to support the rights of those who are conspiring to do us harm, to eliminate religious pluralism, or convert our sorry souls?

I visited an unofficial Baptist website this week devoted to converting Unitarian Universalists. I will give the author some credit. He or she suggests, in approaching UUAs (at least they could get our name right?) "demonstrate that you value them as a person, you value their opinion, and their search for truth." That's nice to say, but is it possible to do that — and then try to convert me?

The author also has what is a very common misperception about humanism, suggesting that humanism is necessarily godless. I object strongly and assert that humanism is neutral on the subject of God. It is no more godless than music or architecture or hopscotch. Humanism is an agreement to work from what we know. Humanists do not believe that man is the measure of all things, but that human knowledge is limited.

I make a point about this because I believe that the Constitution of the United States takes the same neutral approach. The Constitution is neither pro- nor anti-god. It just recognizes that trying to nail god down is futile and divisive and no way to run a society.

But back to the website, which concludes, "Love your pagan friends sincerely. Tactfully show them that the only way to an abundant life is through Christ, and wait for Satan to let them down." Now I'm not dumping on some poor individual website weaver with a warped sense of Christian generosity. I'm dumping on an alarming abundance of Americans who believe that their Christian or Muslim or whatever duty is to make *me* believe what *they* believe.

Since immigration laws were relaxed in 1965, the United States has become the most religiously diverse country in the world. Prior to 1965, laws were so restrictive, especially to Asians, that "Jesus Christ himself could not get into the U.S." The new diversity has led to all kinds of difficult cases for public policy.

When an ordinance was written in Florida to ban animal sacrifice as practiced by a local Santeria

group, someone quipped, it's illegal to kill a few chickens with a prayer, but OK for colonel Sanders to kill thousands without one. The courts struck down the ordinance and Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote: "religious beliefs [and practices] need not be acceptable, logical, consistent, or comprehensible to others in order to merit First Amendment protection."

Muslim charities offered relief to those hurt by the Oklahoma City bombing. Muslim emergency and medical workers cared for the injured. But public memorial services declined offers of Muslim participation.

Efforts to restrict religious pluralism are sometimes overt, such as when churches teach that religious pluralism is a plague. Other efforts are more subtle, like cities using zoning ordinances to deny groups the right to build houses of worship (citing aesthetics and property values).

A 1991 publication lists 650 pages of acts of arson, graffiti, vandalism and violence against houses of worship. Since *we* are a 132 year old congregation with a traditional-looking building and a cross, I wonder if we often pass. What would happen if we were more visible, either as a different kind of religion, or as a defender of others?

When a Cambodian Buddhist group was intimidated out of a rezoning attempt in Maine, a Quaker group loaned them \$10,000 to start up elsewhere. Pluralism is not passive.

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As Americans we celebrate freedom of conscience. So should we allow Sikhs to carry symbolic daggers to work and to school? Should we allow Jews to wear a yarmulke on military operations? Do we allow those for whom a beard is part of their religious identity to wear one even though it interferes with a mandated safety mask in the factory?

Should we support the Islamic Society's request that schools adapt menus, toilets, holidays, gym classes, and restrict the mingling of male and female students and instructors?

What are the limits? Should we allow religious groups to control their followers? Clearly many Americans are willing to give up some control over their lives to religious authorities. Should the state, then, intervene? When the religious authorities enforce a strict diet? No use of medicine or modern technology? No public education? Shunning? Genital mutilation? Where do civil authorities step in?

Shouldn't private groups be allowed to carry out their own traditions? Voluntary associations, whether religious, professional, philanthropic, or political, are essential to democracy as a middle ground between the individual and the state. Protecting these private voluntary groups is good public policy.

Happily it is not the role of courts to determine which beliefs or practices of such groups are correct, but simply (hah!) to ensure a civil society in which, with reasonable limits, all can be practiced.

What principles do the courts utilize to accomplish this balance? One principle is that we should offer “reasonable accommodation.” We should be patient and compromise where possible to ensure the free exercise of religion.

On the other hand: free exercise *can* be restricted if there is a “compelling state interest.” Now that national security has taken such a high profile as a compelling state interest, we might anticipate that the balance is going to be out of whack for a while.

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Meanwhile, Islam is with us in the Midwest. The longest continuous American Muslim community began in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1895. The Detroit metro area today has about 250,000 Arab Americans, most of whom are Muslim. The Islamic Society of America is headquartered in Plainfield, Indiana. Estimates of the population of Muslim Americans varies dramatically but is probably at least six million and growing, with 1,400 mosques (over 25 in Houston). I’ve had difficulty finding Muslim contacts in Marathon county, but it’s only a matter of time hopefully we can be proactive in our welcome.

Islam is a religion of universal equality and dignity for all human beings. There are different interpretations of this, of course, just as with Christianity, Buddhism, and Humanism.

The Qur'an says: “If god had so willed, He would have made you a single people.”

There is great diversity within Islam. Not just the Sunni/Shiite split, but national and cultural differences, Arab and African and Asian subgroups, mystical and militant sects within sects, liberal factions leading the way in women’s rights, and other social revolutionaries which defy categorization.

Islam in the United States brings together all of these different groups. Can we model for them a civil society in which their differences can coexist? Or will Islam in the U.S. boil into turmoil that harms us all?

In Milwaukee two years ago on the eve of Thanksgiving, representatives of Christian and Muslim groups signed a covenant affirming their mutual support and love for one another, and committing to the exercise of understanding, cooperation, and growth in unity through faith.

I especially was drawn to the word “exercise” in this statement: “the exercise of understanding, etc.” Because tolerance is not the work of the couch potato. Tolerance is not the same as apathy. Universal goodwill is not indifference. It is a way of actively relating, not just a passive theory. It is the hard work of keeping a balance between not establishing and not preventing.

Tolerance begins at home — with your kids, your in-laws, your partner. Even inside yourself if you're half Catholic and half Buddhist, etc. To cope with such diversity in our community and our world, we first need to cope with it in ourselves. That can be a lot of work.

Inside ourselves we seek some unity with a wider social consciousness. We have nostalgia for connections to the past and to family, for something to which to be loyal, for something that lasts. Sometimes we want all this so badly that we're willing to have it forced upon us. Or we're willing to force it upon others. Let us resist that temptation — and find the coherence we seek by building relationships in our community instead of imposing an artificial creed.

We could have unity by insisting on one religion or no religion. Wouldn't that be the ultimate freedom? To have no religion?

We've seen that banning religion does not work. Not because people are inherently superstitious and need the outlet of religion. Unity by banning religion does not work because it disempowers people. Religions are essential not just as a matter of justice because no one should be left powerless but for the matter of saving souls: because powerlessness corrupts (souls) just as much as absolute power. That, in my opinion, is the seed of al Qaeda.

Voluntary associations (churches, unions, service clubs, etc.) are necessary to democracy because therein people get a practical education in democracy: how to debate civilly, how to make decisions collectively, how to take responsibility. This is what we will do after the service today in our annual congregational meeting. We become citizens on a higher level. We can't do this by observing passively.

Toleration does not lead to social harmony, but leads to the free exchange and competition for resources and loyalty. Toleration of different kinds of religious and social groups, even those who ban gays and atheists, leads to greater participation in society by individuals, leads to more types of social services being available, and leads to protection against intolerance as more and diverse groups buy into the system.

It wasn't long ago that we thought nothing of the fact that private groups had their own secret rules and funds and a certain amount of power. Legal tolerance of diverse social organizations means putting some bigoted people into power. But the overall effect is good. Yes, we need to draw the line when groups put dangerous people in power, but we can't draw that line too hastily without recognizing what is at stake.

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Unitarian Universalists are skeptics who value associational life. We are not just wild flames, but flames with a loyalty to burn within the loosely controlled environment of the chalice. We make sure the chalice has a broad opening and a broad base. And we don't seek to snuff out competing flames. The symbol of the Unitarian Universalist Association is the chalice off-center, not intended to dominate or hold the central place of the circle. It's adapted from an old Universalist symbol with the cross very small and humble occupying just a side portion of a larger circle.

The circle of world religious symbols on our T-shirts, while derived from a beautiful stained glass window in the Rockford, Ill., UU church, unfortunately places a chalice in the center of the other world religious symbols. Though not ideal, it does emphasize our efforts to seek worldwide connections.

During Ramadan, a billion Muslims worldwide are connected thru their fasting and reminded of the deprivations that some experience daily. Through our recent deprivation of peace of mind Americans have been reminded of the want of security throughout the world. We understand better how effective are the crimes committed with the intent to intimidate. We are united with those in our town and in our world who have not been protected from such intimidation.

But we still don't know much about them. As educators our work is far from finished. Whether we teach social studies or social skills, whether we teach our own children or other people's children, there's plenty of understanding to be gained. Though "diversity" has become a pleasant buzzword in our public schools, it's still a quagmire to actually teach the content of different religions. So it still makes a tremendous difference to support other institutions that teach tolerance and history and religion in all of its diversity.

It still makes a tremendous difference to be *out* as a UU. We're all the religious diversity some people will ever know. A Muslim woman who was going to speak publicly after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City initially feared wearing her head scarf, since so many Muslims had been attacked in the weeks following that event. But she was urged to do so, and was later told: "Thank you, I had no idea a Muslim could feel the way you do."

Ultimately the unity we seek will not be religious, but civic. There will be no universally shared creed, heroes, holidays, or interpretation of history. While descendants of European settlers celebrate Thanksgiving this week, many Native Americans will hold a day of mourning. These seemingly incompatible interpretations of the events of 1621 must be allowed to uncomfortably coexist. We must risk sitting together as did the legendary pilgrims and natives. Sitting together and listening.

Let us neither conquer nor be conquered, but be strong, together. Let us continue to seek relationship, rather than agreement.

CLOSING HYMN *No Longer Forward nor Behind* #9

Suggested Reading

Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (2001)

Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (1997)

Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (2000)