

UUFCF Sermon on Interfaith Concerns  
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One of the requests I received for sermon topics to cover was interfaith relations and peaceful coexistence, and I want to frame my talk, not in abstract principles or ideas, but with real-world experience. Since we are only days away from the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, I thought I would frame my talk around the challenge of interfaith relations that were catalyzed on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 -- September 11<sup>th</sup> provoked a crisis in faith relations here in the US and globally. 9/11 became the gas poured on a fire that exploded into what seems, to me at least, to be another episode in the Crusades - the fight for the moral and religious high ground between Christianity and Islam.

As you all know (I have spoken about this several times), I served as priest in charge of Saint Paul's Chapel in NYC, starting in April 2001. SPC is directly across the street from the former World Trade Center, Building 5. I was at the foot of the South Tower on the morning of 9/11 when the second hijacked airplane collided with it, erupting into the fireball that became traumatic and infamous in our memory.

After overseeing the relief ministry for first responders at SPC – an operation that lasted for 8.5 months, had over 15,000 volunteer shifts, and served over 1/2 million meals – with the help of a few others I started a non-profit called “Sacred City, Inc.” The mission of Sacred City, Inc. was to create, at the epicenter of destruction wrought by religiously affiliated violence, a CENTER for bringing the world religions together, to work for peace and conflict transformation in the world. We envisioned an interfaith chapel, with services led by a roster of faith leaders from all corners of the religious spectrum and all around the world. But alas, like many ideas that, at least I think are timely and important, it was not to be. We then moved on to the idea of creating Gardens of Forgiveness.

I have a visceral memory of GZ in NYC when Osama ben Laden was assassinated on May 2, 2011. It was frightening to me to see the bloodlust and desire for revenge clear and unguarded – enormous crowds of people were holding up their cell phones, and some their BIC lighters, all singing

“God bless America.” Many experienced this as the solidarity of “brothers in arms” when the battle ends. To me it was chilling. Bin Laden deserved to face justice, but my impression [and I could be wrong!] was that this savoring of “sweet revenge” on a bitter enemy, this ending of a battle in a “Holy War” seemed to me to ensure that there would be **another** one.

The challenge of faith relations was again center stage.

One of the questions I heard often immediately after 9/11, was “*Why do they hate us so much?*” “*Is it that they are just jealous of what we have?*”

As Unitarian Universalists, you all already know how naïve these questions are.

And September 11, 2001 wasn’t the first time the WTC had been attacked. If you remember, it was also attacked in 1993. Ramzi Yousef and Eyad Ismoil, both avowed Muslims, drove a rental van full of explosives into the public parking garage beneath the World Trade Center around noon. They ignited a 20-foot fuse and fled. The explosion did great damage, crippled the electrical system, filled the buildings with thick smoke, and killed six people.

“Why do they hate us so much?” While nothing justifies the killing of people (I am also opposed to capital punishment), we might consider what all the fuss is about. While it was unequivocally wrong for them to murder people, we need also to ask “Is something going on that we should know?”

Back in 2003 I gave a talk for a group of folks from the National Council of Churches, at the request of my friend, the Rev. Shanta Premawardana. The talk was entitled, “The Future of Our Past: Some Thoughts of 9/11 Moving Forward.”

In preparation for that talk I discovered an essay written by Jean Gardner, a professor at Parsons School of Design (NYC), in 2002 entitled “ARCHITECTURE AS ETERNAL DELIGHT: Reflections on the Attack of the World Trade Center.” In her writing she draws attention to many little-known facts about the religious motivations of the terrorists who attacked the US on 9/11. She points out that the architect of the World Trade Center, Minoru Yamasaki, was renowned for an architectural style that combined

modernist buildings with sacred Islamic architecture. Yamasaki was a favorite designer of the Saudi royal family. His job just prior to the World Trade Center was the remodeling of the airport in Riyadh. The World Trade Center's gleaming spires of global capitalism - unknown to many - included sacred Islamic architectural ideas. For example, the lower level windows had curves and arches often found in mosques. Any of you remember this? Most blatantly, the courtyard between the buildings of the former WTC was *modeled after Mecca*. It is not even coincidental that the first hijacker to fly an airplane into the World Trade Center, Mohammed Atta, was an *architect*.

“Why do they hate us so much?” Could it be that we had taken their sacred understandings and applied them what they hate the most? – their understanding of an imperialist America dedicated to the idolatry of greed? Yamasaki used to refer to the WTC as the “Mecca for international trade.” Of course, there can be, and probably are many more reasons. But could we start here?

On 9/11, A jihad – or “holy war” – was declared. And we happily walked into their trap. How many years and how many lives have we lost in Afghanistan? Not to mention the mistake of blaming Iraq.

But if we are going to live together in peace, we have to find ways to honor one another and to try to understand faith perspectives other than our own. Interfaith cooperation is not just a polite topic for academics to expound upon collegially at conferences, over tea; *interfaith respect and cooperation are vital for creating a peaceful world and for transforming conflict.* IMHO, a “win-lose” always devolves into a “lose-lose.” Interfaith cooperation is about creating a “win-win.”

We must honor each other's values, not just for politeness, but because not to do so creates a disharmony that ultimately can provoke responses of violence. Ask Mandela and Gandhi – how do you get rid of your enemies???

*Make them your friends.*

Let's return to the Crusades.

In the year, 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, the monk Francis from the Italian village of Assisi, volunteered to go. His desire was to cross the battle

lines and reach out to the enemy (Muslims). He did so, and was beaten severely, within an inch of his life. His persistent request, to meet the sultan, was finally honored. The relationship that developed between Francis (his first name isn't "saint" LOL) and Sultan Malek al-Kamil (the leader of the Muslim forces), give us an example for how to stop conflict, and how to show mutuality and respect in interfaith relations. This extraordinary and unprecedented conversation gives us a glimpse of what is possible for the peace, harmony and peaceful co-existence among differing faith traditions.

They sat together. For close to three weeks. The Sultan's attache cared for Francis' wounds. They honored each other's traditions, sharing heart-felt convictions about their faith, not trying to proselytize one another. After a lengthy dialogue, Francis departed. The Sultan wished to lavish upon him many precious gifts, but Francis couldn't accept them due to his vow of poverty. He did, however, accept one gift: an ivory horn. It was the horn used to call Muslims to prayer throughout the day. The horn is now in the Franciscan museum in Assisi. From 800 years ago.

Back in the 1960's it became quite a fad to predict the end of religion, and to place bets on when religion would go down the tubes.

In 1965, Harvard professor, Harvey Cox wrote a book called *Secular City* that exploded upon the consciousness of the times, insinuating that the religious chains binding the human spirit were breaking, and soon we would all be free of the oppression of religious dogmas. Also, Church leaders, like English bishop John A. T. Robinson, tried to reckon with these implications of secularism for people of faith, writing a little book entitled *Honest to God*. *Honest to God* went straight to paperback and was printed in a volume just small enough so as to fit into the back pocket of jeans! Young people – many of you, perhaps – were fed up with oppressive and stilted religious ideas of the times. Freedom was the prevailing passion.

That same year, in 1965, Emory professor Thomas Jonathon Jackson Altizer, a man who had a penchant for wearing pastel suits, announced to his religion class that God had died. This pronouncement became the cover of *Time Magazine* on April 8, 1966. I have a copy for hanging in my study. BIG red letters on a black background: "IS GOD DEAD?"

[These are some of the guys I was writing about in my, as yet unfinished, dissertation.]

MANY predicted that soon God would be out of business. Or at least that people, in a secular age, would have little to no interest in God or religious faith.

They couldn't have been more wrong.... At least on that point. [Sacred City, Inc. was a direct reference to this]

While mainline WASP-y Christian denominations are certainly on the decline, there has been an explosion of interest in non-Western European faith traditions. There was also an explosion of evangelical and Pentecostal fire in the 1980's, something that even Harvey Cox himself acknowledges in a later book entitled *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Re-shaping of Religion in the 21st Century*, in which he confessed to was a little off the mark.

As one might say, the demise of religion and religious practice has been overrated.

While mainline denominations and traditions are in decline, there is a robust and surprising increase in religious experience and spiritual practice all over the world.

And if we learned ANYTHING from the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, I hope we have learned that interfaith religious appreciation, cooperation and mutual respect are not niceties: **THEY ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO OUR thriving AS A HUMAN RACE.**

So what are the principles of interfaith engagement? How do we promote religious cooperation and respect?

Organizations such as our UUA and our fellowships, as well as others including the United Religions Initiative, have some core principles that create positive outcomes for interfaith engagement:

1. Mutual respect for the sacred wisdom of the other's dogmas and experiences, and indigenous wisdom
2. Active listening instead of proselytizing
3. Heartfelt sharing, not preaching and/or coercion

These principles are embodied by what seems to be a universal "golden rule":

*To do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

The 7 Core Principles of UUism, and the 6 Sources of Wisdom clearly mark us as a UU Fellowship as committed to interfaith cooperation:  
(from UUA)

1. 1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. 2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. 3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. 4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. 5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. 6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. 7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Six Sources  
(from UUA)

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

On a good day, I think, a UU fellowship is *itself* an exercise in interfaith cooperation.

In closing, I'd like to focus on one incredibly important practice that empowers interfaith cooperation to flourish: SERVICE.

We might differ on the name we use for "God" but we can roll up our sleeves and get to work feeding hungry children.

We may differ in our religious practices, or even have no practices, but we can work together to end child trafficking.

We may not even believe in God or a Higher Power, but we can work with those who do to teach English as a second language to those who have come to live among us.

SERVICE.

This is a topic, known well by one of our own: Derek Harrison wrote a wonderful book, I am finally beginning to read, entitled *Turning Times: Stories of People Who Serve*.

So, what stories do you have of interfaith experiences?

Do you have any stories of working with people of different faiths for a common goal?

Do you share the idea that interfaith cooperation is essential for thriving?

Let's have a conversation...