

Holy Days Conversations

Jamaica Plain, September 16, 2007, Rev. Terry Burke

Last year, the television program *The Daily Show* had a funny, bitter episode where Jon Stewart moderated a dialogue between what were supposedly a Muslim extremist and a Christian fundamentalist. Actually they were program regulars. Their religious conversation went along the lines of 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammad is his prophet, as everyone knows.' And, 'the Palestinian peasant Jesus, born in the year zero, is God's son, as everyone knows.' The two continue to argue past one another until Jon Stewart interrupts, 'You clearly aren't agreeing on anything. We need to wind up in another minute. Try to find consensus on something.' The supposed Muslim says to the supposed fundamentalist Christian: 'He's a Jew. We don't like Jews.' The Christian replies, 'Neither do we.' The segment ends with them "high fiving" each other.

It's hard to get religious groups to talk to each other. We gather for worship today during the holy time of Ramadan for Muslims, a period of fasting and repentance during the day, and spending time with family in the evening. Rosh Hashanah and the Jewish High Holy Days started on Wednesday at sundown. The High Holy Days begin with the new year of Rosh Hashanah and culminate with the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. They are a time to focus on reconciliation with God and neighbor. Friday, September 14th, was the Christian holiday of the Feast of the Holy Cross. Some Christian traditions liturgically raise and lower very slowly a large cross in the four directions for this holiday; it's very Zen-like. In centuries past, it was more of an equivalent of a Christian "Fourth of July" celebration - 'Hooray for our team!'

More than ever, Muslims, Jews, and Christians need to be in dialogue. That conversation is usually quite difficult. On a personal note, I grew up in Southeastern Michigan, an area with one of our country's highest concentrations of Arab-Americans. One of my grandfathers, of uncertain ancestry, came from Bialystok, which before WWII had the highest percentage of Jewish people of any city in the world. If my grandfather was

Jewish, I would fit the line of Adam Sandler's song listing prominent Jews that goes "Ann Landers, and her sister Dear Abby/ Harrison Ford's a quarter Jewish, not at all shabby..." While I identify with the UU Christian part of our liberal Unitarian Universalist spectrum, I have a deep love for the Jewish tradition, and my friendship with Rabbi Victor Reinstein in JP has been a great blessing.

When I was in divinity school, I had a conversation with a Muslim who asked me about Unitarianism. I explained that, traditionally, Unitarians regarded Jesus as a great prophet and teacher, possibly divine, but different from transcendent God. He replied, "You must become a Muslim then!" Recently, we've had the pleasure of getting to know a Lebanese Muslim man who is dating a relative of mine. Ahmed went to Christian schools in Lebanon, and his father wouldn't let him worship in mosques, because he considered them recruiting grounds for extremists. Thankfully, he's very comfortable talking with us about religion.

In our congregational life, several years ago I led a class on various forms of mysticism in religious traditions. I had enormous trouble finding either a Jewish or Muslim speaker. The role of mysticism is a fault line among liberal Jewish leaders; after great efforts, Rabbi Reinstein came to speak to us. Muslim religious leaders would promise me speakers who never materialized. Something about Arabic notions of hospitality precluded their saying, 'No, we don't have anyone who can speak to your group.' So along with theological differences, the religious groups have distinctive, varied different cultures to deal with.

At First Church, we have periodic discussions whether we should add additional symbols to our cross. One symbol which is always mentioned is the Star of David. Yet, the rabbis that I've mentioned this to find the idea appalling. One compared it to the proselytizing of Jews by groups like the evangelical Christian "Jews for Jesus." We do have a Passover Seder as part of our church tradition. We have Jewish members, it's the "Last Supper" meal of Jesus, and it has themes of justice and liberation. So it's a joyful part of our church life. I've had church members become very upset when I said that, while I support

Israel, something has to be done about the rights of the Palestinians. That's a topic that's hard to talk about even among ourselves as Unitarian Universalists.

Outside the church, I've been involved in the Mass. Council of Churches' Jewish/Christian and interfaith dialogues. Those conversations are never easy, though the representatives who choose to be involved in such discussions are, as you'd guess, usually people very open to other traditions. Last June, I was involved in a wonderful interfaith event largely organized by my friend Rabbi Reinstin. Victor helped organize an event supporting the new Mosque at Roxbury Crossing, a conservative Muslim group that has been opposed by conservative Jewish groups.

Several hundred people attended the solidarity event. I found it moving to be in a crowd that was roughly 50% Muslim and 50% Jewish. While the mainstream Jewish leaders that I know from interfaith events stayed away, the Jewish Workman's Circle Chorus sang. A rabbi told the old joke of the man who prays that if God exists, God let him win the lottery. The man keeps praying and praying and still doesn't win the lottery. Finally God speaks to him: "Give me a break - buy a ticket!" The rabbi then said, "What we are doing today is buying a ticket, in the hope that we can live together in peace." This week, a church member told me of a friend from the Workman's Circle Chorus who recently was on a study tour of the West Bank. Speaking to a Muslim leader, he mentioned he was from Workman's Circle in Boston. The man replied, "Oh yes, you sang at the event for the mosque in Roxbury." Small actions of connection can have big consequences.

In Stephen Miller's book on Conversation, he identifies the two biggest enemies of dialogue as 'righteous anger' and non-judgmental assent. He lists traits of real conversation that include: a sense of equality among participants, true listening, having an open mind, and a sense of humor. As Miller says in today's reading, you can't have a real conversation with people who think they are God's representative on earth.

In a service last year, our Quaker friend Ghanda DiFiglia spoke of an Israeli village that is deliberately both Jewish and Arab. This living together in dialogue is very rare. School

lectures reflect both points of view on topics like Israeli history, and the opposing views are held in tension.

The mystics from the various traditions usually get along well in dialogue. Thomas Merton, as a mystical Catholic monk, got along fine with Buddhist monks and Hindu mystics. Lawrence Kushner's reading on Jewish mysticism speaks of the human person as a microcosmos, as the whole world, and our individual actions being essential for the repair of our world to its original place in God. These Jewish mystical ideas have parallels in Christian and Muslim mystical thought.

What can we do at First Church in Jamaica Plain, Unitarian Universalist to further the conversation between these three Holy Days' adherents? We can hear different perspectives in our worship. I'd love to have Rabbi Reinstin preach to us again, and hear from people like my Lebanese Muslim friend Ahmed. We can study about other traditions, as in the mysticism class and last year's Koran study group. Our church school learns about different traditions. Our Jamaica Plain Forum provides us with a wonderful platform to reach people who would not consider coming to a church service or study group. Perhaps a dialogue forum could be combined with a potluck. We can all try to move outside our comfort zones in our personal conversations with people of different faiths.

My role model for such conversations is my late friend and colleague Dick Kimball. Dick had a deep affinity for the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith traditions. He made a special effort to become friends with a Muslim man who had been one of his students. Then, one day, after some event in the Middle East, the man made a horrendous Anti-Semitic remark to Dick. He replied, "Where do you find that in the Koran?"

Trying to reach beyond religious boundaries, a few days before his accidental death, mystic Thomas Merton prayed this prayer at an interfaith conference in India:

Oh God, we are one with You. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen.

Start the conversations that will heal our world. Speak in love. Amen