

The Myth of Interfaith Dialogue
A Sermon
By Frieda Gillespie

The idea for this sermon came to me as I attended the Interfaith Clergy Association in Framingham's Thanksgiving Service this year. I know at least a few of you were there. It was a lovely interfaith service held at the Greater Framingham Community Church. Clergy from Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, various Protestant Christian, Unitarian Universalist and B'hai faiths all participated. During the service there was a collection taken for the Salvation Army. The woman that stood up to thank everyone for the offering from Salvation Army, made a declaration for Jesus. It was one wrong note in an otherwise harmonious symphony of thanksgiving and it made me wonder as I have often before about how we view our religious beliefs and what keeps us from being in dialogue with each other.

The experience brought to mind an essay I had read in a History of Christianity class at seminary by Lydia Maria Child, which I read from today, and I began to think about the irony of clergy coming together from different faiths while our religions have developed along side each other and have changed each other for more than a thousand years.

The myth of interfaith dialogue is that we have distinct and separate religions that we bring to a table where we sit and endeavor to tolerate one another. I submit that this is simply not what is going on. What is going on is that we have been each touched by a complex network of spiritual, religious and life experiences. The religious traditions we associate ourselves with are each permeated with the influence of many cultures and religions—permeated thousands of years ago and even today are continuing to be imbued by cultural changes, scientific discoveries, and globalization. There is an irony in the fact that we come together as strangers when all the while we are closely related religious cousins. The other mythical aspect of this dialogue, which I think we all actually intuitively understand as false is the belief that in the encounter with another we can remain unchanged in our faith.

When Luther and Calvin generated the great Protestant movements they recognized as clearly as the Catholic Church the importance of eliminating freethinking and dissent. It used to boggle my mind that these radical thinkers would advocate the execution of men and women who thought differently than they did. But I "got" the fact that we cannot co-exist as separate faiths without influencing one another. There is great danger to our status quo in interfaith dialogue. We can start out with the idea that we are there to be tolerant and to hopefully convert our misguided friends, but look out, they turn out to be people who can shake us up and touch our hearts and we are changed in the process.

I am a student at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. This is a liberal Christian seminary plopped in the middle of the Bible belt, and run by the Disciples of Christ. There are quite a few students there who serve churches in very conservative faith traditions. At Brite these students go to classes and take classes from female and openly gay ministers. They are taught the radical notion that the Bible was written by many

men, and a few women too, for various all-to-human purposes. They take courses where Christianity is placed in dialogue with Judaism, Islam, and the Eastern traditions, and they begin to question their own theology. They are often shaken up and sometimes they leave. The ones who stay are transformed. Rather than consider a move to a more open denomination, like ours for example, they have opted quite courageously to remain in their own churches. There they cannot directly challenge the deeply entrenched beliefs and prejudices of their parishioners, but can have an on-going gentle influence that they hope will bring about change.

Likewise, I have been very touched by the Christians that I've met at Brite. The depth of thinking, openness, and courage of many of my teachers and classmates has been a surprise to me. I had before this experience only known very closed-minded Christians outside of our faith.

Diana Eck has written a beautiful book called "Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras." It is about her travels and encounters with people of other religions starting in a small town in Montana all the way to India. In the book she writes about the categories used in discussions of interfaith dialogue. The first is exclusivity. People who view their religion this way think, "Mine is the only true religion; the rest of you are out of luck, too bad." This has largely been the stance of Orthodox Christianity.

A second category is inclusivity. People, who view their religion this way, believe that everyone is actually part of their religion without knowing it. Diana Eck uses a quote from C.S. Lewis that illustrates this very well. He said, "I think that every prayer which is sincerely made even to a false god...is accepted by the true God and that Christ saves many who do not think they know him." This is the view of many Catholics and Protestants today. Although benign in intent, Eck points out that inclusivism uses its own religious language and concepts to try and understand the other. It does not attempt to reach for the self-understanding of someone in another faith tradition. In that sense it is rather arrogant, while allowing for a great deal of tolerance.

The third category and the one that Eck lifts up is pluralism. People who view their religion this way think, "God or reality is bigger than I know. Perhaps others have found a good or even better way than I have." There are several aspects of this view that Eck outlines that will help us understand this category:

1. Pluralism is not just the fact of plurality alone, but it is active engagement with plurality.
2. Pluralism is not simply tolerance, but also the seeking of understanding.
3. Pluralism is not simply relativism, but assumes a real commitment.
4. Pluralism is not syncretism but is based on respect for fundamental differences.
5. Pluralism is based on inter-religious dialogue—something not present in the first two categories.

All of these categories of interfaith dialogue take on a different look when we acknowledge the world's religions are not distinctly separate, but bear traces of each other and each other's ancient origins. This conversation then is not with strangers but cousins and grandparents and great-great grandparents. We have far more common ground than we suspect.

The use of prayer beads, incense, mortification of the body, and the monastic life are just some of the ways Lydia Maria Child believes Catholicism has been infused with aspects of Buddhism and Hinduism. They correspond just a little too closely to be coincidence. All of the world's religions are infused with their own ancient nature festivals, Gods and Goddesses. Even Protestantism didn't entirely divorce itself from pagan rituals that still surround Christmas and Easter upon which they are based. Christianity is a stew of various influences starting with the Hebrew Bible itself, which has a number of references to very ancient Persian, Babylonian and Ugaritic myths. Added in to the stories of Jesus and his teachings, are the Greek Platonic views of an eternal soul and afterlife, which didn't exist in ancient Judaism at least not in the same way. The stories of the virgin birth abound in more ancient religions and mythologies and most scholars agree that they were added to the accounts of his life long after Jesus' death.

This is not surprising really when we consider that at the time Christianity was being crystallized into a religion separate from Judaism, there were places such as Alexandria in Egypt where the world's religions met in the marketplace literally and figuratively and mingled their goods, practices and ideas. This intermingling continued over at least a thousand years.

It was never more pronounced than when the great Mongolian tribes of Genghis Kahn conquered the better part of Asia, Russia, and a good portion of Europe. In his remarkable book, *Genghis Kahn and the Making of the Modern World*, Jack Weatherford tells the story of a low-caste, impoverished 12th century man of the Mongolian steppes, who from a young age had experienced the deprivation and fear that comes from living in a violent society. He made history by conquering more of the known world than any other person and named himself Genghis Kahn.

What I was surprised to learn was that he did this with a vision of creating a world government where harmony and peace would be the ultimate goal. He instituted many new ideas which survive today in our society. I'm going to leave it to you to read the book if you'd like to learn more about that. But, one of his key strategies from the very first campaign was to institute absolute religious freedom among his people. Riding with him were Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Manicheans, and more. He would not even allow his own native religion to become a national cult. He created the first society of this kind in written history. What is fascinating to me is that it was about the same time the descendants of Genghis Kahn penetrated into Europe that ideas of religious freedom began sprouting there.

As the Mongols controlled more and more of the world's goods and riches, they made their trade routes absolutely safe for travelers throughout Asia and into Europe. Never

was the world more connected until the rise of technology. Where there is religious freedom there is religious diversity and co-mingling of scripture, practices and beliefs.

It makes for some interesting combinations. Why shouldn't Native Americans who have embraced Christianity consider their ancient stories as valid an "old testament" as the Hebrew Bible? Why shouldn't Haitian Catholics practice their ancient magic along with their prayers to Mary? Why shouldn't a Unitarian Universalist pray to St. Christopher even after the poor saint was disappeared by the Catholic Church? Why shouldn't a non-Hindu practice yoga or a non-Buddhist practice meditation?

As Unitarian Universalists we are known for our syncretism because of the fact that we pull bits and pieces of other religious texts into our worship and religious education. We are also known for our respect for religious diversity. Diana Eck believes we are the opposite of pluralist in that we don't stand firmly in a unified theology from which to be engaged with another. For her, this is a lack of identity and commitment. In other words we dabble rather than engage and really work to understand. I think we are guilty as charged, but I believe there is more to this than Eck has considered.

How we as Unitarian Universalists engage with other religions is a real question for us because Eck and other Christians are endeavoring to set the ground rules for interfaith dialogue. From their view it must be done from some place of authoritative tradition that then makes itself open to another tradition and where both are open to change. Our faith tradition is made up of individuals who haven't fit in for various reasons to an orthodox religious identity. Ours is a tradition of heresy, of questioning, of standing alone, and of standing with others who want the freedom to think independently. Another aspect of our tradition is that many, many of us come from other faith traditions and some of us keep spiritual practices and even participate still in other traditions. There are many multi-faith families in our churches. Their children are certainly exposed to multiple faith traditions growing up. Thus we have perhaps the most diverse congregations theologically.

When I was growing up, my mother was a spiritual seeker. She brought home a wide range of religious, esoteric and philosophical ideas, which she never pushed on my brother and me in any way. But she had a way of making these ideas very intriguing by choosing colorful characters as teachers or dropping enigmatic phrases and questions at the dinner table like "the map is not the territory" or "who is the "I" that observes our thoughts?" One day we would hear Katherine Kuhlman the dramatic evangelist on the radio and the next the chants of Paramhansa Yogananda. We went to hear Krishnamurti and listened to Alan Watts talk about East meeting West on Public Television. We did Kundalini Yoga with Yogi Bajan as a typical family activity, and I devoured my mother's books on Gurdjieff and General Semantics. We practiced bio-dynamic gardening with the Theosophists. And believe me there were many others. If you are sitting there wondering who all of these people are don't worry, you're not alone. None of these people were in the mainstream although they were all more widely known 40 years ago than they are today. It was the 60's of course and we lived in Los Angeles, California, which by the way is the most religiously diverse city in the entire world today.

Anyway, all of this led to my own spiritual journey, which is another story. But perhaps it is because of my mother's influence that I view organized theology as more than a bit too confining. The only thing my mother did insist on my doing which I resisted as much as I possibly could, was to attend Sunday School at the Unitarian Universalist church. And here I am today, making a life of it. Go figure.

It's not hard to figure out really. This movement allows me the freedom to continue my explorations unimpeded by the dogma of others.

"Make a light of yourself," the Buddha said. If we are following our own faith questions using our inner guidance rather than established authority the world becomes our proverbial oyster. Pearls of wisdom are available to us from many sources and when we come together in dialogue with other faiths we have real and dynamic questions to offer rather than a show and tell of conclusions. "Make a light of yourself." Rather than being ashamed of our willingness to view various sacred and secular texts on a common playing field, let us recognize our strength in being able to stay with the questions unafraid, or perhaps in spite of our fears, until they are truly answered within our own hearts and minds.