

THE CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY

Second Sunday Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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Each year at this time, I choose an overarching theme for my talks on the second Sunday of each month from now until May. This year, the choice of subjects was a “no-brainer.” The highly publicized events of the past few months, the past few weeks, and even the past few days have focused our attention on the controversial issue of **religious diversity in America**.

The most recent and most absurd example is the fiasco with the minister of a tiny congregation in Gainesville, Florida, who organized a highly-publicized event to burn copies of the Koran on the anniversary of 9/11. The resulting psychodrama reflected not only the minister’s grandiose illusions about saving America from Islamic terrorism, but more importantly the thoughtlessness of the major news networks in awarding this fringe event the kind of international attention it did not deserve. The collusion between this delusional individual and the sensation-hungry media would have produced a powerful recruitment video for Islamic militants around the world. Fortunately, the spectacle has been averted for the time being. Religious leaders across the theological spectrum stepped forward to denounce this flagrant display of religious intolerance. However, I do find it deeply ironic that the Reverend Pat Robertson belatedly condemned this particular gesture of hatred toward Islam, which he himself has expressed numerous times.

Example #2 of religious intolerance: The ongoing controversy over the construction of an Islamic community center near the site of the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York City. The proposed center is **not** a mosque, but does include a worship space for Muslims to practice their faith. The imam who has led the campaign to establish this community center has been a champion of interfaith understanding and cooperation. Nevertheless, the center’s opponents have portrayed the center as an outpost for militant Islam and an affront to the victims of the 9/11 attack. As much as I can understand their sensitivity to the **symbolic** significance of an Islamic presence near the site of that cold-blooded attack, I am frustrated by the inability of so many

Americans to understand the diversity **within** Islam. The perpetrators of the 9/11 attack are no more representative of the Islamic faith than the mass murderers of innocent Muslims in Kosovo are representative of the Christian faith.

And finally, the widespread public ignorance about President Obama's religious faith. According to a recent poll, one out of every four American adults (and nearly half of all Republican voters) believe that our president is a Muslim. He is not the first American president to have his personal faith deliberately misrepresented. When Thomas Jefferson ran for the office in 1800, his political opponents warned voters to hide their Bibles because he would have them confiscated and destroyed if elected. Abraham Lincoln was accused of being an infidel because, like Jefferson, he never joined a congregation. Dwight Eisenhower was attacked as being an "Anti-Christian Cultist"—partly because his parents were Jehovah's Witnesses.

But perhaps the greatest challenge to a presidential candidate's religious faith occurred exactly 50 years ago, when John F. Kennedy was the nation's first Roman Catholic candidate for president. A group of Protestant leaders led by Norman Vincent Peale organized an opposition rally in Washington, DC. "Our American culture is at stake," he warned them. "I don't say it won't survive, but it won't be what it was." In response, Kennedy told a group of ministers in Houston, "This year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed. In other years it has been—and may someday be again—a Jew or a Quaker or a Unitarian or a Baptist Today I may be the victim, but tomorrow it may be you—until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped." [Nancy Gibbs, "The PietyTrap," *Time* 9/13/10, p. 68]

America is the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Perhaps for that very reason, we struggle constantly to strike a balance between our tradition of tolerance and our longing for the security and **presumed** cohesion of the past. In her book *A New Religious America*, Diana Eck offers a useful framework for understanding the different ways Americans respond to the challenges of religious diversity: **exclusion, assimilation, and pluralism**. "For **exclusionists**, the answer to the tumultuous influx of cultural and religious diversity, which seemed to threaten the very core civilization of America, was to close the door. . . . The message, in brief, was stay home, or go home, or in any case be excluded from the table of participation here in America."

In our present context, this response is greatly amplified by perceived threats to our personal safety and the media-fed stereotype of all Muslims as antagonistic toward America.

“For **assimilationists**, the invitation to new immigrants was to come, but leave your differences behind as quickly as possible. In other words, come and be like us.” For many Muslims and others from different backgrounds, this approach poses a real dilemma as they struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs and practices with their desire to become part of mainstream American society. And they are understandably concerned about the attempts by exclusionists to marginalize them and their religious faith as threats to America. They join the ranks of other groups from the past who have felt the sting of American exclusivism: Catholics, Jews, and followers of Asian religions.

“For the **pluralist**, the American promise was to come as you are, with all your differences, pledged only to the common civic demands of citizenship. In other words, come and be yourselves.” The American motto is “*E pluribus unum*”: “One out of many.” As Diana Eck says, “The relation of the *pluribus* and the *unum* can be sounded in all three keys, depending on the emphasis. For the exclusivist, the oneness of the *unum* requires the exclusion of those who are different. The manyness of too much difference poses a threat to oneness. For the assimilationist, the oneness requires the many to shed their differences and become assimilated into the normative culture. For the pluralist, the oneness is shaped by the encounter of the many, the engagement of the many.” [Eck, p. 47]

Most Unitarian Universalists align themselves with the pluralist approach to religious diversity. We see ourselves as welcoming and encouraging diversity, and yet we remain a disturbingly homogeneous denomination. During the coming year, I will invite you to join me in exploring the issue of religious diversity from several different angles. Think of the analogy of peeling away the layers of an onion, from the outside to the inner core. Next month we will start by looking at the history of religious diversity and religious tolerance in our nation from the arrival of the first refugees from religious persecution to the establishment of legal protections for religious freedom that are hard-wired into our Constitution. Then we will take a closer look at religious fundamentalism as an exclusivist reaction **against** diversity, and discuss the warning

signs when religion has become a divisive or even destructive force. In the following months, we will explore the issue of religious diversity at the levels of our culture, our community, our congregation, and finally our personal beliefs.

You may be wondering: How does religious diversity show up in our personal lives? Many of us have had a variety of experiences with religion during the course of our lives. The residual effects of these experiences, both positive and negative, remain with us—even when we think we have left them behind—as inner conflicts that have not been fully resolved. And so, as the monthly series progresses onion-like from outside to inside, I will invite you to explore religious diversity from the **inside** by reflecting on the religious diversity that **you yourself embody**.

There are those who argue that we are a “Christian nation.” Diana Eck strongly disagrees, and so do I, and so I hope do you. The founders of our nation, she says, “had vision enough to see that whoever arrogates to oneself or one’s community full truth and authority in matters of religion is usurping the authority that, they believed, was God’s alone. . . . Those who want prayer in school classrooms, the Ten Commandments posted on public buildings, or Christmas crèche displayed at city hall will need to look again at this gift. The twin principles of religious freedom and nonestablishment [of government-supported religion] provide the guidelines for something far more valuable than a Christian or Judeo-Christian nation. They provide the guidelines for a multireligious nation, the likes of which the world has rarely seen.” [Eck, p. 384]

The world we are living in is complex, confusing, and sometimes threatening. May we vow with one another to face it with courage and grace, knowing that the pursuit of “one out of many” is often frustrating and uncertain. May we also offer support to one another in actively pursuing the mission of our faith as expressed by former UUA president William F. Schultz:

To teach the fragile art of hospitality;

To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;

To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;

And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

DISCUSSION (end at 12:10)

HYMN # 128 “For All That Is Our Life”

CLOSING WORDS # 698 (by Wayne B. Arnason)