

12/5/10 Sermon

“Islamophobia”

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

I find myself distressed over the hatred and fear expressed against our Muslim neighbors and fellow Americans. One wonders if this is the new Anti-Semitism – the next group for religious and political bigots to hate and to stir the melting pot to boil over into violence. We have seen Muslims harassed, reviled over the supposed “Ground Zero Mosque” and threats to burn the Holy Qur’an – an act of blind prejudice and ignorance.

I am talking today about Islam because as a pluralistic religion we are called to engage in an interfaith dialogue as a means of promoting our seven principles – a free and responsible search for truth, to respect the worth and dignity of every person as an integral part of the Web of Existence; regardless of their religion beliefs, ethnic origins, the color of their skin or sexual orientation. We uphold each person’s unique spiritual quest and we respect all faiths that lead to personal truth, for we are all seekers of the holy.

Our goal must be to build a global community based on peace, justice, mercy and acceptance of diversity. All of us must be fully engaged in this process both spiritually and politically, if we are to save our civilization. As a faith, we follow many different paths to enlightenment. We know that our journey is enriched when we walk with others and learn from them in a mutual exchange of ideas and traditions. Dialogue is important at this juncture in time precisely because of this ongoing campaign of hatred and to expand and stretch the arc of justice. Only by doing that can we finally build the Beloved Community.

Lest we forget; Muslims are a part of our local and global communities. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have sadly put stress on the global – largely peaceful – Islamic world. By working with Muslims locally, we can learn more about how to work with them in a committed, sustainable and accountable way in this difficult time. Just as Unitarian Universalism inspires its members to work for social justice and do community service so does Islam.

In recent years, Islam has almost been almost exclusively described as a faith full of radicals and backward practitioners, using violent rhetoric. Images of the Iranian Revolution in the 1970s up to the present time, Saddam Hussein's despotic regime in the 1980's and 1990's, and experiences after 9/11 and the ongoing War on Terror are often the only

modern views of Islam that Americans see. We know these recent images are extreme, for over its long and proud history, Islam is one of cultural beauty and peace. Violence is not representative of the whole faith.

Muslims, like most immigrants are hardworking citizens. They contribute much to our rich national culture and heritage. Unfortunately, foreign-born Muslims face double suspicion due to the combined stigmas of being a Muslim and an immigrant.

As UU's we are called to open our hearts and minds to all religious traditions. It must be our cause to stop the rampant hatred and prejudice spread by those who would divide people into groups of us and them. It is disheartening when religious and political fundamentalists forget our traditions of religious freedom and would trample the rights of minorities – of which they were once themselves.

The focus of this most recent "Islamophobia" is the controversy over building Mosques, not just in New York City, but across this land. In numerous situations, citizens and local governing bodies have given into fear and protested and/or denied building permits for Islamic centers in what I perceive to be a direct violation of the freedom of religion. The arguments expressed against these religious centers is that Islam is a religion of violence and hatred, bent on wiping out Christianity, murdering their children and supporting Jihadi terror centers hidden across the country. We hear it all the time – "not in my backyard," or Muslims are un-American, the same things we have heard about Catholics, Jews and Mormons in the not too distant past.

Recently in Wilson, Wisconsin, a zoning commissioner asked the applicant if the proposed Mosque would have "any weapons or military training." Can you imagine asking a Baptist church or UU congregation the same question?

Closer to home, a recent Islamic Center addition permit process took place on Rucker Road in Alpharetta. The permit was denied for zoning and traffic reasons – an all too common and specious argument. One might wonder if any Christian church would have been denied the right to build there. While these particular battles may not have reached the level of prominence and vitriol as the Park 51 Mosque two blocks from Ground Zero, they are symptomatic of a growing intolerance and fear.

Politicians have fanned these flames of hatred. Our own Saxby Chambliss (now a U.S. Senator) once proclaimed that the "state should arrest every Muslim that comes across the state line." Similarly, our former representative and House Speaker Newt Gingrich seemed to equate Islam

with Nazism. He said, "The core argument emerging from the (the anti-Mosque protest) is that Muslims are not and can never be full Americans."

Further, the notion put forth that we dishonor those killed in the 9/11 attack by building this Mosque ignores the fact that Muslims were also killed. The Mosque has been there for over a year, has all the permits necessary and the approval of the Mayor to proceed and there are other Islamic sites within several blocks of "Ground Zero." Protest continues but on a diminished level, yet today; over 60% of Americans oppose the building of the Mosque. Perhaps, this protest sign said it all, "All I need to know about Islam, I learned on 9/11."

This pattern of intolerance, of conflating Islam with terrorism and savagery must be countered for the sake of religious freedom and pluralism for all of us. As UUs, we have been the target of such ignorance. We cannot, for even one moment, tolerate a shooting in one of our churches or the burning of Mosques which just happened in Oregon; nor can we countenance the burning of any holy book. The pastor in Gainesville, Florida, who wanted to burn the Qur'an shames all people of faith. He said that "Jesus would burn the Koran as not holy." Billy Graham's son, Franklin, said that "Islam is a religion of hate." Such extreme rhetoric has now reached mainstream religion and the media such as Fox News. As a minister, I am personally offended by such speech that fans the flame of hatred, bigotry and lies. Such speech, especially when religion is involved, provokes not only stone throwing but also suicide bombings.

All this leads me to say again that we must speak out against such demagoguery as individuals and as a faith if we are to be true to our principles. We are called to denounce such acts of bigotry and appeal to Americans' sense of justice and fair play. In this situation, we have in the words of Deborah Weiner, "an opportunity to choose grace, to choose to stand on the side of love when (those around us hate); to extend a hand (of friendship) to those who worship differently, but who are our sisters and brothers all the same. UUs need to support tolerance and solidarity across religious lines." We must show the compassion that the haters do not and offer even to them an inclusive hand of love, regardless of whether they accept it.

The Qur'an said it well: "Respond to evil by doing what is more beautiful in behavior, so that the person with whom one bears enmity transforms into a close friend [41:31-36]."

May that be true for us and all faiths. Blessed be!