

A FAITH FOR THE GLOBAL VILLAGE
A PATH TO HARMONY AMONG THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

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Let me begin with a story.

It is reported that a group of theologian, clerics, and assorted personalities assembled recently to examine the question, "Who was Jesus?"

Jesse Jackson spoke first. "Jesus was Black," Jesse said. "Jesus called everybody brother. He started gospel. He could not get a fair trial."

Bishop Spong also challenged the dignitaries. "Jesus must have hailed from California. He never cut his hair, walked around barefoot, started a new religion."

Others made a credible case for Jesus having been Italian, Mexican, Irish, Palestinian, even Jewish. To describe the rationale for each position would take me too far afield. Suffice it to say that Oprah Winfrey had the last word. "Don't you see? Jesus was woman. She had to feed a crowd at a moment's notice. After dying on the cross, she had to get up from the tomb, for woman's work is never finished."

It all goes to suggest that Jesus is like a Rohrschach test, in the eye of the beholder.

A couple of years ago, the Washington Post reported that as Russian soldiers and Chechnian rebels were in hand-to-hand combat and within earshot of one another, the Muslims shouted, "Allah Akbar", God is great, to which the Russians from the formerly atheist Soviet Union responded with, "Christ is risen".

This is part of a long, bloody history where people kill one another in the name of God. How come that religions that proclaim sublime ideals turn into hotbeds of prejudice, intolerance, war, and genocide?

Imagine now—and it takes a big leap of faith—that at the beginning of the third millennium of the current era, Sarah, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad were to return into our midst and with the benefit of hindsight, were to share with us their updated wisdom.

After introductions had been duly made, matriarch Sarah, Abraham's wife, went first, ladies first.

"Shalom Aleichem, Assalam Aleikum", Sarah started out. "I bring you greetings of peace. Oy weh, all the trouble I caused. I was jealous, so I asked Abraham to expel his concubine Hagar, and their son Ishmael, sent them away into the desert. Now the descendants of my son, Isaac, and hubby's son, Ishmael, Israelis and Palestinians, are at loggerheads with each other."

Moses is overcome with memories. “I, too, am remorseful. I made my tribes believe that they were the darling of the Most High, God’s chosen people. Big mistake with terrible consequences. Every nation wants to be God’s chosen people, so we became victims of their jealousy, bigtime, and of their wrath.”

Mohammad, too, is upset. “Nowadays, many perceive Islam as jihad, holy war, and worse, terrorism. You who live in the West, proud of your material achievements, may I remind you that our faith has a glorious history as a civilizing force. When in the year 1492 of your calendar, the year Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic, Queen Isabella expelled both Muslims and Jews from Spain, also the beginning of Spain’s decline. After many centuries of Convivencia, of Moors, Christians, and Jews living together, learning together, respecting one another, we became mortal antagonists. Colonialism and racism are other depressing chapters in Western history.

“I join you in condemning the excesses of Muslim fundamentalists, but need I remind you that you have your own inflexible orthodox Jews, fanatical Hindus, and Christian fundamentalists who pretend that they represent the essence of their respective religions? I commend you to the Sufis, the mystics of our faith, who brought so much beauty, poetry, and uplift to the human condition.”

Jesus, too, was a mystic, speaking in parables, rather than using the dogmatic discourse of scribes and Church councils. “I am delighted that the Jesus seminar of hundreds of Christian theologians and scholars, are searching for the uncovering the real me. The Jesus Seminar challenges layers of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of my humble teachings. The Seminar seeks to separate the wheat from the chaff. I hope to be invited to one of their next meetings.”

Judging by such utterances, are we beginning to dream that it is possible to establish harmony between the world’s great monotheistic religions? By extension, might we conceive of an even larger harmony? Might we envisage a global faith for our planet, that includes the virtues of paganism, with its attunement to nature, the Buddhist path of meditation and compassion, and the gifts of Hinduism, such as yoga? What would it take?

Reality check. We live in the aftermath of September 11. Osama bin Laden and supreme leader Omar are still at large. We are told there are al Qaeda cells in sixty countries. We are shocked by the gang-style murder of Danny Pearl.

Lately, news from the Middle East and India have been mostly depressing. Add to all of this a look in the rear mirror, millennia of religious intolerance, discrimination, torture, and wars. Enough to make us despair.

Still, hope springs eternal in the human breast. We are not condemned forever to repeat the mistakes of the past. It is within our power to embark upon new, creative avenues. The need for accommodation and harmony is great. There is no time to be lost.

Is religious harmony possible? Yes and no!

No, if we continue on the path of exclusiveness, self-righteousness, and one-upsmanship.

Yes, if we honor inclusiveness and respect diversity. Yes, if we can conceive of unity in diversity. Yes, if we move in a spirit of mutual goodwill and acceptance.

No, if we freeze differences into non-negotiable positions. No, if we divide people into believers and infidels, into camps of orthodoxy and heresy. No, if we listen to the seductive calls for crusades and jihads.

For religious harmony to flourish, we need to emphasize what we have in common, like the Golden Rule—“Do unto others what you would want others to do unto you”, found in all of the world’s religions. We need to strengthen the common cord of compassion, charity, and loving-kindness, as already exhibited by multitudes of practicing Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and so many others.

We dare not submit to the follies of fanatics, addicted to man’s inhumanity to man. When will we gain the insight that the birth of different faiths proceeds from different historical circumstances? It should not be that difficult.

It is already well established and agreed upon that the overarching theme of the Jewish faith is the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt. Though it has a particular time-slot and place in history, it is a universal, prophetic theme. While emerging out of the Jewish experience, it continues to resonate throughout the globe, in the hearts and minds of countless generations.

We find it in the struggle of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who has been called a modern-day Moses. We find it in Gandhi’s non-violent resistance, in Mandela’s search for reconciliation. It echoes in the martyrdom of Michael Servetus against an oppressive church, in Channing’s passionate outcry “Forever young for liberty”.

On the other hand, Judaism badly misses the mark when it claims that Jews are God’s chosen people. While understandable as a counterbalance to slavery in Egypt, it turned out to be clearly counterproductive. It is of the childish one-upsmanship variety of “My daddy is bigger than yours”, childish narcissism, “We are God’s favorite”.

Such bragging triggers resentment and hatred: “We’ll show you who is boss. We’ll push you into ghettos. We’ll expel you. We’ll ship you in cattle cars to gas chambers.” This is in no way to excuse anti-Semitism, but an illustration of how an absurd premise, can lead to absurd consequences.

How do we transcend such tragedy? We already possess a model for what to do. We find it in how the history of the Jewish tribes was made into a universal theme, the struggle to overcome slavery in all its forms. Likewise, proclaim that all nations, all

tribes, all races are chosen. God plays not favorites, otherwise God is not God, but idolatry in the service of chauvinism.

Christianity, like Judaism, has a universal message, the triumph of love and life over Herod, over Pontius Pilatus, over a phony Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, ultimately over death. Jesus, though dead in the flesh, liveth in the spirit of the faithful. One can crucify the body, but one cannot kill the human spirit.

Where Christianity misses the mark is when it claims that Jesus is the One and Only Son of God, the One and Only Lord and Savior. Jesus is chronicled to have said, "Whatever I do, you can do." Jesus summons us to sublime, divine greatness, while the dogmatic Christ of many scribes and theologians remakes us human beings into inferior, miserable sinners. From a historical perspective, the claim of Christ's uniqueness of understandable in the confines of the small Mediterranean universe in competition with the ancient, pagan world-view. Now, a couple of millennia later, we live in a planetary world. At a time like this, Christians are invited to let go of triumphalism.

How about Islam? Islam announces "La Ilaha Ill' Allah, Mohammdea rasulela"—God is one and Mohammad is its prophet. Translation: Reality if one and interconnected, and Mohammad is a prophet of the principle of oneness. So far, so good. Alas, zealous theologians get into the act and in their exercise of one-upsmanship, Mohammad is certified as the greatest and "last" prophet. later prophets are disqualified. Actually, prophets keep arising, the Baha Ullas, the Mahatma Gandhis, the Martin Luther Kings, the Thich Nhat Hanhs, of this world. Their name is legion.

What is the lesson of all of this? As long as religions do not stray from the high road of universal, unifying insights and wisdom, our faith traditions are a boon. As soon as they start to compete for supremacy and force people into dogmatic straight jackets, they become a curse upon the human race, a source of intolerance, prejudice, torture, in the extreme unholy war and genocide.

The task before us is not really that complex or difficult. Just decide to go from the confrontational approach to the promised land of mutual appreciation. Let us be renewed in the hope that the great world religions need not remain stuck in ruts. They can let go of childish narcissism, adolescent one-upsmanship and grandiosity, and immature self-righteousness.

Judaism will not lose anything if it gives up the notion of the chosen people. The Reconstructionist wing of Judaism has already done so.

Christianity is not doomed, if it concedes that Christ is not the Only Lord and Savior. catholic theologian Paul Knitter has already written a book, asking the question, "No Other Name?"

Islam will not be crippled if it admits that Mohammad is not the last prophet. Voices are arising in the Islamic world that clamor for a more gentle, less militant understanding of Islam.

The Unitarian faith is not diminished, if it grants that reason is an instrumental, rather than an ultimate value, that feelings and spirit matter, that enthusiasm and ecstasy are OK, that myths, while wrong in detail, are often right in intention.

The religious task of the new millennium is to be evolving and inclusive, mutually respecting, accepting, welcoming.

May it be so.