

INTERFAITH: OUR PRESENCE ON THE WORLD STAGE

By

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What is Interfaith Tolerance, Dialogue, and Harmony?

Interfaith Tolerance is the acceptance of the rights of people to practice their chosen religion. Interfaith Dialogue is civilized communication between followers of different religions, involving exchange of information about each other's religious beliefs and customs. And, Interfaith Harmony is the goal of interfaith dialogue.

Why do we need to think about interfaith harmony? There are many reasons. Some people have had the experience of being discriminated in jobs, society, public life, etc., others have experienced insulting comments. Still others have had their property vandalized, or physical violence committed on their person, sometimes resulting in death. And, of course, on the world stage, we have horrible atrocities committed in the name of God and religion, just because one belonged to a different religion.

What are some examples of religious tolerance in history?

*Cyrus the Great (600 – 530 B.C.E.), founder of the Persian Empire

According to Wikipedia, "Zoroastrianism has long encouraged interfaith, all the way from Cyrus the Great's speech in Babylon, which permitted the population to keep following their own religion and keep speaking their own language. Cyrus did not enforce the State religion unto the people... Cyrus freed all the Jewish slaves from Babylon, which earned him a place in the Jewish scriptures. Zoroastrians believe that all religions are equal, and that their religion is not superior to other religions."

*St. Francis of Assisi (1181 – 1226 C.E.), a Catholic priest, peacemaker

*Akbar the Great, (1542 – 1605 C.E.), Mughal emperor of North India

The formal worldwide interfaith movement started with the first Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1893. Swami Vivekananda of India who mesmerized the audience said “If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: “Help and not Fight,” “Assimilation and not Destruction,” “Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.”

A Zoroastrian priest, Dastur Jamasji Minocherji Jamasp Asa was a member of the working committee of the World’s Parliament of Religions (1893), and Sir Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, a priest, scholar, public servant, and community activist, was the Zoroastrian representative at that parliament, where he presented a paper titled ‘Belief and Ceremonies of the Followers of Zoroaster’ (link: http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/file/Modi.pdf) , in which “he quoted extensively from western scholars and presented Zoroastrianism.as generative of civilization and progress” (Ringer, p.100) (link: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/modi-jivanji-jamshedji>).

While religions have been a civilizing force on human beings, we also see a history of discrimination, harassment, violence, genocide, and forced conversions perpetrated in the name of religion. One of the big reasons for mistrust between religious communities is ignorance about the beliefs of other religions, and false stereotypes created by people in the past. Leaders have used such ignorance, stereotypes, and fear of

other religions to incite and justify discrimination and violence against religious minorities.

Today, we see growing tensions, religious discrimination, violence, genocide and forced conversions happening in some of the middle-eastern and African countries. There is a possibility that religious extremists might get their hands on nuclear weapons. We cannot stick our heads in the sand and ignore the dangers.

It is therefore important to facilitate and have a dialogue between members of different religious communities, so that there is an exchange of information about each other's religious beliefs, and realization that there is much we share in common, especially in the ethical teachings of the founders.

As we learn from interfaith dialogues about each other, there is a gradual reduction in the mutual fear and distrust that existed previously. Interfaith organizations can play a crucial role in facilitating interfaith dialogues and lectures by religious authorities that are open to the public. By joining interfaith organizations we can build coalitions of good people from all faiths who will stand by us when we face religious intolerance against our family or community.

There is sometimes a fear of interfaith dialogue, joining interfaith organizations, or even attending organization meetings. Some people are afraid that they might be subjected to proselytizing. While there can be instances of proselytizing on an individual basis, most interfaith organizations have a written rule against proselytizing.

How can someone find out about a local interfaith organization? On the internet, there is a wealth of information that can be accessed via a computer search using the key words "interfaith organization" with the name of the city where one lives. The Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) has an interfaith committee that can help to find an interfaith organization in your local area.

An added benefit for a relatively unknown religion like ours, is the opportunity to establish our presence in our communities, our States, our nation, and throughout the world. Most people have not heard of Zarathushtra or Zoroaster, and some of those who have, think that there are no more followers of that prophet living today. So, participating in interfaith events and organizations is one way of educating the public about us.

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to attend interfaith events in your local areas, develop relations with people of other religions, and join interfaith councils. I have copies of some useful interfaith websites that you are welcome to take with you.

Some useful interfaith related websites:

The Interfaith Infrastructure: Citizenship and Leadership in the Multireligious City <http://www.pluralism.org/interfaith/report>

Interfaith Youth Core (2002) - Chicago, Illinois www.ifyc.org

Temple of Understanding (1960) - New York, NY www.templeofunderstanding.org

Family Promise/Interfaith Hospitality Network (1986) - Summit, NJ www.familypromise.org

United Religions Initiative (2000) - San Francisco, CA www.uri.org

Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (1988) – Chicago, IL www.parliamentofreligions.org

North American Interfaith Network (1988) – North America www.nain.org

Council a for Parliament of the World's Religions –
www.parliamentofreligions.org