

“Tolerance, Acceptance, and the Place for Heretics in Multi-faith Relations”
A talk delivered on 15 May 2016 at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

INTRODUCTION: “If the Falling of a Hoof” a poem by Hafiz

(translated by Daniel Ladinsky)

If the falling of a hoof
Ever rings the temple bells,

If a lonely man's final scream
Before he hangs himself

And the nightingale's perfect lyric
Of happiness
All become an equal cause to dance,

Then the Sun has at last parted
Its curtain before you—

God has stopped playing child's games
With your mind
And dragged you backstage by
The hair,

Shown to you the only possible
Reason

For this bizarre and spectacular
Existence.

Go running through the streets
Creating divine chaos,

Make everyone and yourself ecstatically mad
For the Friend's beautiful open arms.

Go running through this world
Giving love, giving love,

If the falling of a hoof upon this earth

Ever rings the
Temple
Bell.

Hafiz Shirazi, who died in 1390, was a Persian poet—most consider him the greatest Persian poet. “Hafiz” is an honorific for a person who has memorized the entire Koran. “Shirazi” means he was from the town of Shiraz. So, that’s not his name . . . but that’s how he’s known.

Hafiz wrote Islamic mystic poetry of the sort for which Rumi is the best known. This sort of poetry is usually called Sufi, though all the poets in the mystic category weren’t actually Sufi. But the poetry is generally about ecstatic union with the divine, and usually uses metaphors of wine and drunkenness for that ecstatic state, and usually refers to the divine as “the beloved,” which gives the uninformed the notion that Rumi or Hafiz wrote love poetry. They didn’t. Also, alcohol is forbidden in Islam, so they aren’t talking about being drunk in any normal sense either.

Another oddity is that the poetry isn’t conventionally religious. We might even call it “humanist.” Notice the imagery:

If the falling of a hoof
Ever rings the temple bells,

If a lonely man's final scream
Before he hangs himself

And the nightingale's perfect lyric
Of happiness
All become an equal cause to dance,

then, says Hafiz,

God has stopped playing child's games
With your mind
And dragged you backstage by
The hair,

Shown to you the only possible
Reason

For this bizarre and spectacular
Existence.

It’s also not conventionally religious to say that “god” is playing childish games.

What’s going on here? Well, I’ll get back to that . . .

ONE: Beyond Trolling

As I have lamented before, because I post reflections concerning religion on the internet, some people seem to think that I'm trying to be argumentative. I'm not trying to be argumentative. But, as you know, the internet has created the phenomenon called "trolls."

Now, when I was a kid in school, trolls were what lived under the bridge that the Three Billy Goats Gruff had to cross. It was one of those roll-playing games—I *hate* roll-playing games; always have—I have enough trouble acting like myself, let alone somebody else.

But anyway, it was one of those kinetic learning things, I suppose. Three kids were the Three Billy Goats Gruff and all the other kids were the Big Bad Troll. I suppose so that what the troll said was loud. When the teacher forced me to play that game, I preferred to be a troll, because there were a bunch of us, so nobody noticed I wasn't playing along. (I was trying to figure out how to play my self.)

I don't know if kids play that dumb game anymore. But now everybody who publishes anything on the internet is a little Billy Goat Gruff trip-trapping across the troll's bridge, and you never know when the troll's going to say, "Now I'm coming to gobble you up!"

And the biggest Billy Goat gruff responds: "I'll poke out your eyes with my big horns and they'll come out your ears!" (It was a simpler time.)

Nowadays, trolls are everywhere. And I get trolled by both fundamentalists and fellow UUs who think that humanism is a step too far. They are disruptive and annoying without in any way furthering the conversation. All they have to say is, "Now I'm coming to gobble you up!"

So, in my estimation, here's the first rule of multi-faith understanding: Please don't feed the trolls and please don't be a troll. Not on the internet and not in conversation. There's simply no indication that people can be argued out of their opinions. So why bother?

I like the way the British Humanist Association summarizes humanism. They have three points and the third goes this way:

- Living things matter more than ideas, including religions, philosophies, differences, and nations.

That's what makes us good at multi-faith work. My conviction is that a predominately humanist congregation is a perfect place to explore religions and philosophies NON-judgmentally. Humanism takes one step back from the religious battles that still rage in

our nation and in our world. Ideally, humanism provides a *religiously neutral zone* in which we can do that work of seeking answers to complex questions. It's a post-religious space.

Here's the most important thing for religious liberals to remember: religions are abstractions. They take very different forms according to which cultures they're in. As you know, London just elected its first Muslim mayor. A majority of Londoners *got it*, despite the fact that the opposition kept throwing around stereotypes.

In your order of service this morning you'll see that the writer Aaron Hill also got it back in the eighteenth century: "I see too plainly custom forms us all. Our thoughts, our morals, our most fixed belief, are consequences of our place of birth."

Perhaps the best example of what not to do comes from the British occupation of India in the nineteenth century. It got back to England that there was a practice called sati—a widow threw herself onto the funeral pyre of her deceased husband and burned to death. How horrific said the British public. So, the occupation force went about suppressing the practice. At that time, the practice was already archaic and only practiced in isolated villages. BUT when the British condemned the practice, it suddenly became a fad. It was a way of resisting the occupiers.

The same is true of the hijab: the more it is condemned by the West, the more women choose to wear it. It's about resisting Western domination.

Frontal assaults on the cultural practices of others don't tend to work out very well.

Second rule of multi-faith work: Avoid assuming your own enculturation is somehow superior to the enculturation of others. And it's nearly all enculturation. (And don't be a troll.)

TWO

So, if we're not planning to bludgeon others into doing what we want, what do we do to change things?

As many of you know, I'm involved with Compassion and Choices, a group lobbying for an individual's right to end their life when there is no hope of recovery.

I preached on the topic last fall. I've written letters to the editor. I testified before a state senate hearing; I spoke at the Day of Reason. For a UU Humanist, it's a no brainer—if I'm on hospice, I want choices concerning my death.

That's logical. That's reasonable. What's the big deal? Well, many (most) religions are against it.

I'm on a clergy group bringing other clergy into the coalition for Compassionate Choice. The first thing I ask is if the person agrees that choices at end of life are a good idea. Among the liberal ministers I talk to, "yes" is nearly always the answer.

Then I ask: Might you preach a sermon on the topic? The answer is usually "no."

Will you publicly support us in a letter of the editor? "No. Can't."

The reality is that individuals understand the need for the legislation. But the institutions they serve either have not reflected on the issue or reject compassion in dying out of hand. Only Unitarian Universalists and the United Church of Christ have come out in support of the issue.

Why bother working with those who disagree with us or who want to avoid the issue entirely? Because in this case we are not asking individuals to change their minds. We are asking individuals to use their influence on their larger denomination. Which brings me to the title of my talk today: "Tolerance, Acceptance, and the Place for Heretics in Multi-faith Relations." "Heretic" is from Greek, *hairesitikos*, meaning "able to choose." If you listen to your own conscience rather than tradition, you're *choosing for yourself*. You're a heretic.

No, the Roman Catholic hierarchy isn't going to change. But the Episcopalians might. The Presbyterians might. The ELCA Lutherans might.

That's how change happens. It's slow but inexorable. We saw it in the fight for gay marriage. We're seeing it in the fight for transgender rights. It's what's happening with Black Lives Matter. And it can happen in the case of end of life choices.

Nothing will change until the vast middle moves toward the progressive edge . . . But: that's how it's done.

Third rule of multi-faith work: stay in the conversation. (And don't be a troll.)

THREE

Multi-faith work is not easy. But it creates change. That's the good that staying in the conversation can bring. That's the method that First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis pursues, as we have for over a hundred years—we take one step back from religion in working with those of other faiths and we are the bridge between the religious and secular worlds.

The Principles of Unitarian Universalism require us to concretize our commitments to the inherent worth and dignity of every person; to justice, equity and compassion for all; and to that free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Good mission, difficult to concretize.

Too many commitments muddy the waters, and too often I see UUs in other congregations roaming hither and thither, repeating their mission like a mantra, until it is meaningless. They're trying to be all things to all people and to do everything at once.

An explicitly humanist congregation such as ours has a slightly different and more focused mission. As I said before, we must bridge the gap between the religious and secular worlds, two groups that don't tend to speak to one another. Ours is an increasingly multi-faith nation and at the same time an increasingly secular nation. We are here to bridge the gap.

An explicitly humanist congregation must get out the good news that meaning and purpose lie in embracing reason, science, and the humanities. Trusting these are the surest way to further human flourishing and save the planet. Yet we have to leave space for all those alternatives out there—because it's pointless to be trolls.

As I say each week, we provide a safe place to share dangerous ideas.

I should add that I'm not a cultural relativist. I don't believe there's a god living in Central Africa just because a majority of people think there's one there, any more than I think there's a redneck Jesus living in Alabama. But I DO believe that we have to meet people where they are. And I also believe that—given a level playing field—progressive humanist values win in the end. There's no inevitable arc to a moral universe—the universe doesn't give a darn about human morality—but there is the slow change that pluralistic societies achieve. That's why the Muslim mayor of London will most likely make a very good mayor.

Fourth rule of multi-faith work: Individuals are less effective than groups. (And don't be a troll.)

FOUR

Listen to that poem by Hafiz again:

If the falling of a hoof
Ever rings the temple bells,

If a lonely man's final scream
Before he hangs himself

And the nightingale's perfect lyric
Of happiness
All become an equal cause to dance,

Then the Sun has at last parted
Its curtain before you—

God has stopped playing child's games
With your mind
And dragged you backstage by
The hair,

Shown to you the only possible
Reason

For this bizarre and spectacular
Existence.

Go running through the streets
Creating divine chaos,

Make everyone and yourself ecstatically mad
For the Friend's beautiful open arms.

Go running through this world
Giving love, giving love,

If the falling of a hoof upon this earth
Ever rings the
Temple
Bell.

Hafiz knew that the “falling of a hoof upon this earth” will NEVER ring a temple bell. Reality and religion never touch . . . except in human emotion. The realities of our earth and our lives cannot and will not connect with the abstractions of religion. Any religion; any philosophy. After we realize that, the curtain is parted and we see reality for what it is—glorious and hideous at the same time. Then the children's games in our minds stop. And we realize all we can do is run through the world “giving love, giving love.”

Our good news is starting from the premise that the “falling of a hoof upon this earth” will never ring a temple bell. NO religion or philosophy stands in the face of reality, and we're better off realizing that and getting on with giving love. But some Muslims know that too; and some Jews; and some Christians; and some Buddhists; and some earth-based religious practitioners; and on and on. Human beings are better than their labels and better than their religions.

And us, we are the bridge between those religious people and others who have rejected religion altogether. We can join together, recognizing differences but putting them aside because every human beings understands a scream of despair and a bird's song.

Last rule of multi-faith work: Be like Billy, not like the troll. (Well, except don't be gruff. That's not nice either.)

SOURCE

"If the Falling of a Hoof" a poem by Hafiz, translated by Daniel Ladinsky.