

**Article published in *Al Tasamoh*  
1/19/2011**

**By: Rev. Douglas Leonard**

**Religious Diversity in America: Division or Harmony?  
One American's Experience**

On the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, I was attending a morning meeting at the Marble Collegiate Reformed Church in New York City. I was serving as an Associate Minister on staff at the church. The Senior Minister of the church, Rev. Dr. Arthur Caliendo arrived with a quizzical look on his face as he entered the meeting room. He said, "I've never seen anything like it. I was walking to the church along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and a large jet airliner flew right overhead." We all assumed that the airliner had simply gotten off course. Moments later a secretary ran into the meeting and announced, "A plane has just hit the World Trade Center." Still assuming the crash had been accidental and not understanding the extent of the damage, we stopped our meeting and said a prayer for the pilot, the passengers and anyone who may have been killed in the crash. We finished our meeting and gathered on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue where we had a clear view of the twin towers. By then the second plane had hit. We stood astonished as we gazed at the profile of one of the planes etched into the side of one tower with black smoke billowing out from the side of the other. We knew in that instant that we were all victims of a terrorist attack.<sup>1</sup> People began to flee the city in droves fearing more attacks to come. Our impulse was to stay. The

---

<sup>1</sup> I include Muslim Americans when I say "we". There are nearly 7 million Muslim American

ministers of the church and I put on our vestments, our robes and stoles. We opened the church for prayer. Through out the day thousands of people wearing expensive business suits covered in grey ashes walked north on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue like zombies from a mass grave. Protestants and Catholics came into the church for prayer. Atheists came into the church seeking answers. Several members of our church lost husbands, wives, sons and daughters in the tragedy. Dr. Caliandro, the other ministers of the church and I held weekly grief counseling sessions to help our members through their losses. We ended the year with memorial services near the crater that had become the public grave of the victims. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> changed our lives, but not in the way that you might imagine.

A member of my congregation asked me, "Where was God on 9/11?" In the weeks following September 11th, New York had not become an angry or vengeful city. New York had become a city of compassion. I believe God was in the spontaneous prayer gatherings of thousands of people as they congregated in Central Park for candle light prayer vigils. I believe God was in the hearts of the crowds who formed lines several city blocks long to donate blood for victims. And I believe that God was in the hearts of people as they offered protection and friendship to their Muslim neighbors insuring that prejudice would not prevail.

Americans have become more vigilant, less naïve, more watchful. But as a whole we have not become more hateful. The events of 9/11 raised the profile of

Muslim Americans, it prompted the nation to learn more about Islam, but it did not lead to division as one might expect. On the contrary, the heightened awareness has led to a greater harmony between Christians, Muslims and Jews. For every press event that focused on the infrequent and isolated incidents of hatred against Islam there were thousands of unreported gestures of good will and solidarity.

New Yorkers and Americans are fierce defenders of religious and ethnic diversity. Religious pluralism is in our roots. It is who we are. Those of us who are Christians would say we are guided by Jesus' commandment to "Love one another as I have loved you." (Gospel of John 13:34). New York has been a city of religious diversity for over 350 years. The church that I serve as a Minister, The Reformed Church in America, was established on the Island of Manhattan in 1628 by the Dutch merchants who came to the Island to conduct a fur trade with the Manah Atin Tribe of the Wappinger Indian Nation.<sup>2</sup> The archives of our church make reference to Roman Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and Muslims coexisting in New York since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Some of the sailors on board the merchant ships that came to the New York harbor for trade were Muslim, as were many of the merchants who worked in the city. Despite what the press would

---

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this is the same church, The Reformed Church in America, which came to Oman in 1893 to establish hospitals and schools. Many in Oman will remember with fondness doctors and teachers of the Reformed Church who dedicated their lives to Almighty God and served His Majesty's Royal family and the people of Oman. Dr. Don and Eloise Bosch, Dr. Wells Thoms, Dr. Paul Harrison, Dr. Sharon Thoms. See The American Mission Hospitals in Oman by Donald Bosch published in 1974 by Oman's Ministry of Health for the full story.

have you believe, the terrorist attack of 9/11 did not shake New York's love for its Muslim citizens, and, in fact, it strengthened our nation's commitment to religious diversity.

In a book titled *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America*, author Gustav Niebuhr tells the story of a growing religious pluralism in America after 9/11.<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr was working as a reporter for the New York Times in September of 2001. He and the reporters of the Times went out to find stories that illustrated a backlash of Christian, Jewish and secular Americans against Muslims. After searching the country for these stories, much to their surprise, the reporters only found six isolated incidents of violence against Muslims in the weeks following 9/11. One of the stories covered the crazed and ignorant man who shot an attendant at a Chevron petrol station in Arizona. The attendant was dark skinned with a beard and a turban, a Sikh mistaken for a Muslim. The press turned their cameras on these six isolated incidents with obsessive focus for the world to see, creating the false impression that these random acts of violence were representative of American sentiment. They were not. Niebuhr later regretted that he and the American press had missed the far larger story. What was not reported in the wake of 9/11 were the hundreds of Christian churches across the country that organized volunteer neighborhood patrols to care for neighborhood mosques by guarding them and preventing violence against them. Muslims found bouquets of flowers at the mosque entrances with handwritten

---

<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr, Gustav. *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America*. Viking Press. 2008.

notes of love and friendship. In Seattle, Chicago and New York, Jewish synagogues reached out to area mosques and offered friendship, protection and assistance. Christian and secular women around the country wore headscarves to express their solidarity with Muslim women. The greater story of American interfaith peace and collaboration was not a compelling story for the press to cover. It was not sensational. Neibuhr wrote *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America* to tell the more truthful story.

In 2004 the world's largest interfaith organization and affiliate of the United Nations, Religions for Peace, counted the number of organizations in the United States that had been formed to bring people together across religious lines for the purpose of contributing to the common good in society. They discovered over 1,000 such organizations, many formed after 9/11.

My own experience mirrors this trend of interfaith peace and collaboration in the US. In the years after 9/11, I served as the minister of the Reformed Church of Cortlandtown and the president of an interfaith association in New York State. One hundred houses of worship including Shia and Sunni Mosques, Roman Catholic Churches, Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox Churches, The Reformed Church in America, Anglican Churches, Methodist Churches and Jewish Synagogues all worked together for the common good. We ran a 19 bed homeless shelter. We served 30,000 meals a year to the poor of the City of Peekskill. We ran an interfaith chaplain program to provide prayer and spiritual

support for sick and dying patients at the Hudson Valley Hospital. We worshipped together in interfaith prayer services on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and on Thanksgiving Day. And we stood in solidarity with each other in times of hardship.

In the spring of 2006, two troubled youth desecrated a Jewish synagogue in our area. They painted swastikas (Nazi symbols) on the walls of the synagogue. They urinated on the Torah scroll of God's Holy Scripture. They turned over the chairs and burned the carpets. The members of the synagogue were devastated. We were all shocked and saddened by the vandalism. But in a beautiful expression of the love that should exist between God's people, the leaders of the Shia and Sunni mosques stood with us to express our support for our Jewish neighbors. The members of our various houses of worship volunteered to help the synagogue to rebuild.

In the same year a group of Sunni Palestinians purchased a decommissioned Catholic school in our town and applied for a certificate of occupancy. They were denied at first for spurious reasons. The town zoning board cited traffic increases as the reason for declining the application. The clergy and religious leaders in our interfaith organization saw through this rejection. When the building had been a Catholic school hundreds of cars and busses came and went from the location nearly every day. As a mosque many fewer cars would come and go on Fridays and Islamic holy days. One hundred area clergy, Jewish

Rabbis, Orthodox Priests, Roman Catholic Priests and Protestant Christian ministers petitioned the Town and spoke in favor of the Sunni congregation's right to build. The Town granted the certificate and today the mosque is a thriving congregation in our town. This is the peace that prevails in the US between Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Sometimes there are misunderstandings between religions in America and, when they occur, part of the reason is a lack of interfaith education among the public. A well-educated public can serve as an antidote to these misunderstandings. To be sure, sometimes the media does seek out and cover incidents of division, but these stories do not present a full and accurate picture of religious pluralism in America.

Just prior to my country's elections last November there was public opposition to the Park 51 Islamic Community Center and Interfaith Prayer Room proposed near the site of the World Trade Center. There were uninformed New Yorkers who opposed the project. The protests were exacerbated by local politicians hoping to garner votes. The media focused on the protestors and nearly ignored the statements from hundreds of Christian and Jewish organizations in New York supporting the right of the Muslim congregation to build.

My predecessor in Oman, Michael Bos, along with the Reformed churches of New York City, paid for an advertisement space in the New York Times in order to support Park 51:

*We are drawn together by Jesus' calling to love one another, and we share a common vocation of pursuing peace with all people (John 13.34 and Hebrews 12.14). It is from this basis that we, as a community of believers, offer the following comments on the controversy that has been generated by the proposal to develop a Muslim Community Center in lower Manhattan.*

*We live in the midst of God's marvelous mosaic. New York City and its environs is a place of cultural diversity and religious pluralism. The positive and inclusive nature of the Christian faith compels us to respect all people, listen to diverse viewpoints, and work in partnership with those who seek peace and the good of our community.*

*First, we call for civil dialogue where the rights of all people are respected. We pledge ourselves to be engaged in settings and venues where interfaith dialogue and cooperation is fostered throughout the city and beyond. We call upon all those who would exploit this situation for their own personal agendas through demagoguery and the demonization of others to cease their rhetoric and extend their ears and their hearts to all. We commit ourselves and encourage others to learn more about Islam. If the current controversy has shown anything, it is the great misunderstanding about the faith of Muslims. We commit ourselves and encourage others to build relationships of trust...*

*Because of who we are and who we are called to be, we celebrate a vision of cultural diversity and religious tolerance, a setting where we can learn about one another, participate across lines of race, faith, culture, and socioeconomic condition to be faithful to our calling in this city. Therefore we are committed to work with the organizers of Park51 and all concerned parties as a reconciling agent so that there is a new way for the residents of this city and all Americans to move forward into a new future in which civil dialogue leads to healing and understanding.<sup>4</sup>*

---

<sup>4</sup> "A Call to Reconciliation" was co-authored by Rev. Michael S. Bos, West End Collegiate Church Rev. Dr. Michael B. Brown, Marble Collegiate Church Rev. Robert Chase, Intersections International Rev. Dr. Jacqueline J. Lewis, Middle Collegiate Church Rev. Charles D. Morris, Fort Washington Collegiate Church. Printed as an ad by the New York Times on 9/10/2010.

This statement from the Reformed Church of America, while it was not widely covered in the media, is representative of the statements issued by nearly every Christian denomination and Jewish organization in New York.

Last August also saw the irresponsible press coverage of the misguided pastor of a small congregation in Florida who planned to burn copies of the Holy Quran. In this instance too, Christian denominations across the nation denounced the pastor and his ungodly plot.

The Reformed Church in America's General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Wes Granberg-Michaelson, issued the following statement in response to the Florida man's offensive plan.

*The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were in the heart of the old Dutch colony of New Amsterdam and only a few hundred feet from the site of the first Reformed Dutch congregation in what would later become the United States. Reformed Church in America members suffered in that attack. Other members of our church hurried forward to offer help to those who lost loved ones on that terrible morning.*

*As we mark this solemn day in our church life, we know that the small group of terrorists who attacked our country on that day did not represent Islam as a whole. No world faith can be fairly judged on the basis of the actions of its most extreme adherents.*

*In our commemoration of the attacks of September 11, let us deplore all forms of religious bigotry. Even as we affirm everyone's right to free expression of ideas, we must not condone anyone's trampling on the religious symbols of others in order to make a point. A tiny minority is threatening to mark this anniversary by burning copies of the Qu'ran. Such an action is a terrible offense, and contradicts all we know about providing a faithful witness to the transforming love of God in Jesus Christ. It is merely a public display of hateful prejudice. Neither the cause of Christ nor the pursuit of peace will be*

*advanced by disparaging other faiths. Instead let us speak about others with accuracy and fairness. Only by showing respect for one another can we build the kind of world we want to live in.*

The impulse to create caring communities of interfaith collaboration, mutual understanding and support across America is a far stronger force than the weak and uncommon response of violence and hatred. The 118 year-old friendship between the Reformed Church in America and the Sultanate of Oman will endure through all time for all of the world as an example of the peace, fellowship and love that is possible between Christians and Muslims. Our friendship is a bond that grows from our desire to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and exemplifies the American ethic to foster and protect a pluralist civil society.