

An American Patchwork of Faith

Opening Words

E. Arlen Goff

We gather here this morn from many homes,
both physical and spiritual.

We sit beneath beautiful stained glass windows,
in pews unpadded, amidst good friends and strangers.

Here we have gathered to seek a word,
not an infallible word spoken from pulpit
nor an illustrious word sung by choir.

The word we seek is the word we hear in the dark corners
of the night, or by a stream on a beautiful spring day.
It is the word we hear whispered in our ear by our beloved
and it is also the word of challenge we hear from our enemy.

It is the word which comes from within us ... deep within us,
and yet it also comes from beyond us ... far beyond us.

It is the word spoken that by all that we hold sacred and holy,
whether or not we name it Christ or Allah, Buddha or Yahweh,
Ganesh or Tao, or the Great Nothingness or our best selves.

It is that word we seek.

Let those who have ears to hear ... listen!

Lighting the Chalice

We light this flame in memory of years past that have brought us to this hour, and to the countless lives, known and unknown, that have made our lives possible.

We light this flame of life in affirmation of the strength that is ours to live this day, and the potential we have to create a better tomorrow.

We light this flame of life that our minds may be enlightened, our love deepened, our path together be illumined by understanding and peace.

Responsive Reading #534

“Gloria”

Gloria

The tenacity of Earth and its creatures.

Kyrie eleison

These children who will go on to save what we cannot.

Baruch ata Adhonai

The ordinary tenacity of plans and of people.

Om

The center of the universe, which is everywhere, not the least place in the human heart.

Alleluia

Love that survives anger, and winter, and despair, and sorrow ...

and even, death.

Shalom

Love that persists.

Nam myo-ho renge kyo

Calm that is the seed in the dark.

Amen

For endings that are beginnings, for beginnings that are endings.

Alleluia

*For the circle, the spiral, the web, the egg, the orbit, the center, the seed,
the flower, the fruit, the opening, the death, the release, the seed.*

Amen

We are going on.

Amen

It is going on.

Amen

Blessed be.

- Barbara J. Pescan

Responsive Reading #352

“An Eternal Verity”

Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as the workbench is the altar.

Ancient as the sword is the sacrificial fire; ancient as the soldier is the priest.

Older than written language is spoken prayer; older than painting is the thought of the nameless one.

Religion is the first and the last - the universal language of the human heart.

Differing words describe the outward appearances of things; diverse symbols represent that which stands beyond and within.

Yet every person's hunger is the same, and heart communicates with heart.

Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one, with a holy land washed by ocean waters, or a holy land within the heart.

In temperament we differ, yet we are dedicated to one august destiny; creeds divide us, but we share a common quest.

Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars; because each has a holy yearning, we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems.

For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities; we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.

- W. Waldemar W. Argow

Message

E. Arlen Goff

"An American Patchwork of Faith"

The world around us has changed, and is forever changing.

In 1960, sociologist Will Herberg wrote a book entitled simply *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. His primary thesis was that being religious was an extremely important part of what it meant to be an American, that religion was a significant factor in the development of the American way of life. For Herberg, as for most Americans at that time, the options were simple. One was either Protestant, Catholic or Jew.

The world around us has changed, and is forever changing.

I grew up in a small mill town in east Alabama. That is to say, I attended elementary school in that small mill town before my father accepted a larger church in the big city of Birmingham.

In that small mill town, River View, there were four churches all located approximately ¼ mile apart as you traveled down California Road.

- First Christian Church, red door, white clapboard building, cemetery in back. The front door opening right onto the street.
- River View Baptist Church, where my father was pastor, largest church in the village. Important people in the village were members: elementary school principal, the mill's assistant manager, several supervisors, former county schools superintendent. White clapboard sanctuary with 3-story brick educational building attached. No air conditioning, so windows and doors were kept open during the hot Alabama summers. I still remember our family dog, who followed us to church on occasion (we lived only 4 houses up the street),

“walking the aisle” when my father delivered the altar call one Sunday morning. The deacons kept asking Dad when Trixie was to be baptized.

- River View Methodist Church, red brick building, small congregation. My father attended VFW meetings in its fellowship hall.
- Fellowship Christian Church, newest church in the village. Non-denominational. No parking.

Things were extremely simple. There were no Catholics or Jews ... only Protestants. Everyone believed in God, in Jesus and knew that you had to be baptized to be a Christian (although they couldn't agree whether to sprinkle or dunk, or whether only adults could be baptized or maybe infants as well).

For us, “marrying outside the faith” meant marrying someone who wasn't Baptist. In my own family, I always thought that it was strange that one of my aunt's supposedly made a mistake when she married a devout Lutheran man, but my other aunt's husbands were deemed OK because they were Baptist, even though they never went to church, and they “drank.”

The only information that we gained about the other religions in the world was during the annual Foreign Missions study, when we would hear of the exploits of Southern Baptist missionaries spreading the Word of God to those heathen Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims in other parts of the world.

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In her latest book, *A New Religious America*, Diana L. Eck (a professor at Harvard University) traces how our “Christian” country has become the world's most religiously diverse nation. While focusing on the three major world religions – Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism – she also tells stories of how communities around our land are responding to a more complicated religious landscape.

Protestant, Catholic and Jew now have neighbors who are Sikh and Wiccan, Buddhist and Bahai, Hindu and Muslim.

For Dr. Eck, a prime example of the incredible diversity of American religious life was the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago:

The 1993 Parliament was much more than a public gathering of international religious leaders. Indeed, the most striking thing about it was that it marked, for the first time, the public manifestation of America's own religious plurality. It was the coming out, so to speak, of a new religious America that would have been inconceivable one hundred, or even thirty, years ago. One hundred years ago [at the 1893 Parliament], the strains of “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” filled the hall during the opening ceremonies. But in 1993 the procession entered the hall to the polyphonic chanting, the cymbals and drums of the Drepung Loseling Tibetan Monks, invoking the forces of goodness.

During the opening ceremonies, I flattened myself against the wall as the procession moved into the great ballroom of the Palmer House. I was lucky to find standing room at all. Each delegate in the procession wore a large-print name badge, and I watched a new religious reality pass before my eyes. This was in the early 1990s, and even I had not seen such a manifestation of our diversity. The saffron-robed Buddhist monks who led the procession came not only from Thailand but from temples in Los Angeles, West Virginia and suburban Chicago. The red-turbaned Jains were from Elmhurst, Illinois and Cypress, California; the Zoroastrians were from Houston and Hinsdale, Illinois. The Hindu delegation included, along with some prominent swamis from India, scores of Hindus from Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Pittsburgh. There were Muslims from Jordan and Indonesia, but many more were from Lombard, Northbrook and Skokie in the Chicago suburbs. Ranks of Sikhs came from the Sikh Religious Society of Chicago and the Richmond Hill gurdwara in Queens. Of course, Protestant ministers and Catholic priests

and cardinals attended from across the spectrum of Christian communities, and Jewish scholars and rabbis passed by also, although relatively fewer, as the opening ceremonies were held on the Sabbath.

And then I saw all those people who had not attended the parliament at all one hundred years ago. Taoists from the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism in Denver, who lead tai chi and chi kong exercises each morning during the coming week, representatives of the Covenant of the Goddess and Wicca, who would spend their sessions that week explaining their traditions to audiences of sympathizers and skeptics. A Bahai youth, part Yaqui and part Apache, wore fringed leggings, a feathered headdress, and a band of jet black paint across his eyes. He was part of the most multiracial of the delegations, those of the Bahai faith, whose North American landmark temple was just north of downtown Chicago in Wilmette.

Finally, representatives of the many Native peoples of the Americas – Navajo and Crow, Lakota and Ojibway – took the stage to offer the blessing of the four directions, the opening ritual act of the Parliament. Recalling that one hundred years ago America's Native peoples had not been invited at all, except as curiosities on the exhibition grounds of the world's fair, Burton Pretty on Top, a Crow from Montana, said, "One hundred years ago we were not present because we were not invited." Recently, he had climbed into the Big Horn Mountains in Montana. "I fasted without food and water. I did this, my brothers and sisters, not for me, but for you. I love you."

The message of the parliament of 1993, from beginning to end, and ritually enacted in dizzying proportions, was "Here we all are." And this message was indeed a remarkable one. In a day when global gatherings and international meetings are increasingly commonplace, the most remarkable thing about the 1993 parliament was the fact that it was also local. I grew from the soil of today's Chicago and from the new reality of the American Midwest. If not a single delegate had come across the Pacific or Atlantic, the magnitude and diversity of the 1993 parliament would have remained virtually intact.

- Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (pages 366-368)

The world around us has changed, and is forever changing.

Recently, *US News and World Report* (the magazine) and *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* a newsmagazine which airs on PBS) commissioned a survey of America's attitudes toward faith and religion, especially in response to 9/11. The significant finding of this study is that "... for the most part, Americans are accepting and tolerant of people who have religious beliefs that are different from theirs. They think all religions have elements of truth, and a large majority does not think of their own religion as the only true religion." According to several scholars interviewed in the media, this represents a "sea change" in American's attitudes towards those of differing beliefs. That's the good news.

The bad news is that the poll suggests (1) that most Americans are woefully ignorant of other religious groups and have virtually no contact with persons of other faiths, (2) that many Americans have only a loose commitment to the faith which they themselves profess, and (3) that religion is increasingly becoming "... only one of many influences that are relevant to the way people lead their lives."

The world around us has changed, and is forever changing.

And how are we dealing with all this change. Let's take a brief look at three news stories.

Lawrenceville, GA. Fall 2001. A local mosque acquires land for a cemetery across from a trendy subdivision. Residents turn out in droves to attend hearings. They decry Muslim burial practices as unsanitary, and worry about decreasing sale values of their homes and property. But, underneath it all, according to a Gwinnett County commissioner, is the smell of religious intolerance. In the end, the differing parties arrive at a compromise. The Gwinnett Muslim community can have their cemetery, but it will be smaller, surrounded by

an 8-foot wooden fence, and they must slightly alter their burial practices to meet concerns about public health.

Fort Hood, TX. Summer 1999. Georgia congressman Bob Barr raises a stink regarding the accrediting of a Wiccan chaplain for soldiers at Fort Hood, TX. The proposed chaplain had impeccable military credentials (she had been an MP and had once been named "Soldier of the Year"), but Barr went public in his outrage that the US military would have a Wiccan chaplain. The Armed Forces Chaplains Board receives letters and phone calls, and their calm response is that they have served Wiccan members of the military for over 20 years. Their role is to "make accommodations" for the religious needs of the men and women of our Armed Forces, no matter what the religion might be.

Captain [Russ] Gunter recalled a typical phone call, this one from a Roman Catholic woman who asked, "Are you telling me the the Department of Defense recognizes Wicca?" [He] responded to her, "It may come as a shock to you, madam, that the Department of Defense does not recognize the Roman Catholic Church."

- Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* page 359)

Billings, MT. Winter 1993. The Schnitzer family places a lighted menorah in the window of their 5-year-old son's room in celebration of Hanukkah. One night, while the child is sleeping, a cinder block is pitched through the window, sending shards of glass all over the room. At first, the local police department simply cautions the Schnitzers to fix their window, and simply not make a public display of their religious faith. However, others in Billings decide that is not a proper response. Five days later, the marquee of a local sportings goods store retailer is emblazoned with these words: "Not in Our Town. No Hate. No Violence. Peace on Earth!" Members of a local United Church of Christ congregation buy up all the menorahs in town, and place them in their windows. Other Christian churches pick up the cause. When there are no more menorahs to be sold in Billings, the local newspaper prints a full-page menorah cut-out, which begins to appear in windows all over town. By the end of the holiday season, menorahs decorated the windows of as many as ten thousand homes, in a city of eighty thousand. "Not in Our Town! No Hate! No Violence! Peace on Earth!"

So you can see. The record is mixed. The world around us has changed, and is forever changing. And we find ourselves unsure how to respond.

Let me make some suggestions.

Perhaps we need to take another look at teaching religion in the public schools. No, I'm not talking about a return to the required Bible classes some of us had to sit through in elementary or high school. I'm talking about classes which portray the wondrous diversity of religious experience around the world, and in our own communities. It's a thought. Just an idea.

Perhaps we need to find ways to build relationships with folks of other faiths. Now, here at High Street, we do have international dinners. But how about having interfaith dinners? What would happen if we made a

commitment to have someone from a different religious tradition speak from our pulpit at least once per quarter? What if we joined in a “sister city” type relationship with the local Islamic center? What if we arranged a tour of Atlanta’s rich religious landscape, visiting and building relationships with the Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh communities?

What would happen?

I think you get the general idea.

When I was in college and seminary, I took coursework on “World Religions”. In both settings, the emphasis was on interfaith *witness* rather than on interreligious *dialogue*. In other words, the focus was on learning about another’s religion as a way of finding ways to proselytize him or her. The goal was to *turn* them, to *convert*. Even back then, I found myself a bit uncomfortable with the whole idea.

What we need is *dialogue*, sitting down around the table and sharing who we are and what we believe. Maybe then, **“our minds may be enlightened, our love deepened, our path together illumined by understanding and peace.”**

May it be so. Amen.

Extinguishing the Chalice

Knowing how quickly the flame of truth might be extinguished, how easily the chalice of fellowship be broken, let us be vigilant in our faith, keep peace in our hearts, and make care for one another the watchword of our lives together. So our light shines out ... everywhere ... into the world.

Closing Words

Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars; because each has a holy yearning, we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems.

For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities; we are children of one great love, united in our own eternal family.

The service is ended. Now the true work of the church begins. Go in peace.