

THREE AMIGOS AND INTERFAITH HARMONY

By Nick Gier



The sacred texts of all religions contain many verses of exquisite beauty and wisdom that fully satisfy the universal longings of the human heart. But it is equally true that all our texts also contain painful and awkward verses that do not enrich the human spirit.

--Sheikh Jamal Rahman

Fidelity to Christ with unqualified openness to other faiths.

--John B. Cobb, Jr.

A pastor, a rabbi, and a sheikh are sitting side-by-side reading from their scripture at the top of their voices. It looks like that worst example of religious interaction, but the “Interfaith Amigos,” as they call themselves, are simply demonstrating how Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have traditionally related to one another. Continuing the spoof, they agree they each can have the right religion every third day. See their “Channeling the Three Stooges” and other videos on youtube.com.

Rabbi Ted Falcon, Sheikh Jamal Rahman, and Pastor Don McKenzie have been working together since 9/11, and they have combined humor and deep engagement with their religious traditions, including the parts of which they have great personal struggles. I had the great pleasure and privilege of experiencing them in person at a recent event at Washington State University.

They started by encouraging their congregations to share Easter, Passover, and Ramadan celebrations. Tired of seeing the same old faces at their interfaith gatherings, they visited an evangelical megachurch in their home city of Seattle. At first they were impressed with the pastor’s sermon, which included the exhortation that if a gay person get AIDS, “Be like Jesus, be quick help this person.”

But then this message of unconditional love and acceptance suddenly went south. Knowing that Rahman was in the audience, the pastor declared: "If you want an angry God, then be a Muslim. If you want to be someone filled with hate, rage, and destruction, be a Muslim."

McKenzie and Falcon were aghast, but Rahman was calm and took the insult as an opportunity to talk to the pastor afterwards and tell him what the Qur'an said about Jesus. One irony in the pastor's condemnation of Islam is that the wrath of God is a central theme in evangelical Christianity.

The Interfaith Amigos tried to get the evangelical pastor involved in interfaith work, but he said that he was too busy building up his church to participate. In any event he was sure that his parishioners would attempt to convert their interfaith interlocutors. He finally did consent to sending some of his people to a Habitat for Humanity project. None of them realized that the house that they all built together was for a Muslim family.

A set-back occurred when Rahman donated a Qur'an to the altar at Camp Brotherhood, a retreat site north of Seattle that had been used for ecumenical work for 40 years. The altar displayed an ornate Bible and a Torah scroll, but the camp board decided not to place the Qur'an in a consecrated place. Instead they removed the Bible and the Torah from the altar and displayed all three in a museum-type glass case.

As McKenzie writes in their book *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith*: "We were disappointed, but we accepted this situation as a sign that deeper dialogue was needed; more bridges needed to be built."

The most daring and successful event was McKenzie's invitation to Falcon and Rahman to participate in communion at his Congregational church in Seattle. His fear was that none of his parishioners would go to Falcon and Rahman to receive the bread and wine, but more went to them than to him.

While on a visit to Israel, the Interfaith Amigos broke through an even more challenging communion barrier. Rabbi Falcon arranged a visit to the home of an ultra-orthodox rabbi. He kindly consented to the presence of Sheik Rahman for a Sabbath celebration, a first for these very conservative Jews. The rabbi blessed the wine and dipped the bread in salt, and Christian McKenzie and Muslim Rahman were graciously allowed to partake of the Jewish communion.

The Interfaith Amigos speak honestly and openly about the shortcomings of each of their religions. McKenzie is most ashamed of Christianity's dark history with regard to its treatment of the Jews, and Falcon is most concerned about the violence and genocide during Israel's conquest of Canaan and militant Jews who undermine peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Rahman is constantly challenged by one reference in the Qur'an about killing the unbeliever, but he explains that it is specific to the Arabian polytheists who tried to wipe out Mohammed and his small group during the first years of Islam. As Rahman states: "The verse refers to defensive fighting and if the attacker inclines to peace, the Muslim must cease fighting."

Rahman likes to tell the story about the interfaith mosque in Medina, where Mohammed invited Jews and Christians to discuss religion. He encouraged them to hold their services there because the place was consecrated to the one true God. Not only did women help build this

mosque, but, as Rahman elaborates, “they performed the call to prayer, prayed alongside men, and sometimes led the ritual prayer.”

In her book *When Women Were Priests* Karen Torjesen demonstrates that early Christian services were held in rich women’s homes and that women led services and consecrated the bread and wine. Rahman’s liberal Sufi sect allows women to sit with men and lead the services. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the leader of the effort to build an Islamic Cultural Center near Ground Zero, is also a Sufi, and he also wants Jews, Christians, and people from other faiths to use the facility and come together in interfaith harmony.

Rahman believes that the key to interfaith harmony is to move from the mind to the heart—from knowledge of the tongue to knowledge of personal being. (He is especially fond of the Sufi saint Rumi’s saying that “One should sell cleverness and buy bewilderment.”) Human behavior can be good or evil, but human nature is basically good. He is just as comfortable with calling it the “Buddha nature” or “Christ in you” as he is affirming that it is “Allah in you.”

The Qur’an speaks of Jews and Christians as “People of the Book,” and Rahman believes that it is significant that the word “book” is singular and not plural. For Rahman this means that the Qur’an should be seen as the third installment of the same divine revelation that began with Abraham. We must remind ourselves that Allah is not a personal name of God as Yahweh is; rather, it is a generic word for the divine. Indeed, Jesus himself prayed to Allah in his own Western Aramaic language. See my “Did Jesus Pray to Allah” at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/Allah.htm.

In the Amigos’ book *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith*, Rabbi Falcon talks about how traumatic it was growing up as a Jew in a gentile world. On his first day at a Cleveland high school he was beaten up by the class bully because he answered “Yes” to the question “Are you a Jew?” He learned to hide his religious identity after that incident.

Rabbi Falcon’s only friend at high school was a Catholic, but when his parents found out he had a Jewish friend he was forbidden to associate with him. Falcon can certainly identify with American Muslims as they now come under attack because of ignorance and fear generated by the Religious Right.

Sheikh Rahman is from Bangladesh and his father was a diplomat. He has lived in many countries and knows five languages. After being harassed and beaten by skinheads in England, he sought refuge in the U.S. where he studied at the University of Oregon and the University of California at Berkeley. He must now find it especially disheartening to find rising anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S.

Rahman proposes that in addition to the “major” we have in our own religion, we should also take a minor in at least one other religion. Instead of respect and tolerance at a distance, we should enter into the other religion and let a process of “mutual transformation” take place.

This phrase was coined by John B. Cobb, Jr., theology professor emeritus at Claremont Graduate University, my alma mater. Cobb has committed himself to “deep religious pluralism”—the Three Amigos call it “inclusive spirituality” —and his motto is “fidelity to Christ with unqualified openness to other faiths.” Cobb has experienced deep mutual transformation between himself and his Buddhist friends.

Falcon and McKenzie were deeply impressed by the way Muslims use their entire bodies to pray. Their feet, hands, ears, and faces are washed in a purification ritual that, for example, makes the hands clean for God's work and prevents the ears from hearing gossip. Rahman tells of two women Christian women who were so moved by Islamic prayer that they have incorporated prostration into their own prayer practice. Please note that no one is converting from one faith to another; rather, they are enriching each other by being open to other religions.

Gandhi and the Dalai Lama both encourage people to stay within their own faith traditions and focus on the good that is found in each. The Three Amigos would certainly agree and they would support the following injunction from Swami Vivekananda: "Christians are not to become Hindus or Buddhists, nor Hindus or Buddhists become Christians. But they must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve their individuality and grow according to their own law of growth."

Postscript. In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, Yahweh regretted that he had created a common humanity with a single language. He was especially concerned that their unity enabled them to build a tower that could reach the gates of heaven. He then realizes that "nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:6-7). For an explanation of the plural language suggesting polytheism, see my article "Hebrew Henotheism" at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/henotheism.htm.

Sheikh Rahman offers the Muslim alternative: "the Quran explains that God could easily have made all of humanity 'one single people' but instead, by divine design, chose to establish diversity so that you might 'vie, then, with one another other in doing good works!' (5:48) and 'get to know one another'" (49:13).

I must admit that I prefer the Islamic view of the origins of human diversity. Rather than a punishment for human striving and the implication that diversity is a sinful state, cultural and religious pluralism is a blessing that will, with sincere interfaith efforts, enrich all of humankind.

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