Sharing Prayers, Sharing Space

Summary: *In seeking to worship together, members of different faiths often encounter logistical and spatial problems. Deeper questions, such as what language and prayers are appropriate at interfaith gatherings, also arise. Alternative forms of prayer and new, deliberately "multi-faith" spaces aim to solve these problems.*

Can people of different faiths worship together? Can they pray with each other? Many groups plan a service together to demonstrate a common purpose as people of faith. Yet this, more often than any other interfaith activity, may test the limits of understanding and reinforce differences among faith traditions. From questions as basic as "Should we open and close our meetings with prayer?" "Could prayers be offered by people from each of several religious traditions, each in his or her distinctive way?" or "What about a moment of silence or period of meditation?" are accompanied by deeper theological and philosophical questions such as "Is there such a thing as 'generic prayer'?" or "Is it even possible to share these most intimate moments of spiritual communion, such as prayer or meditation, with people of other faiths?" There is a wide spectrum of experience—and opinion—on this very question.

Monastics and contemplatives offer distinct contributions to this discussion. Christian and Buddhist monks and nuns, for example, have for years explored the traditions of meditation they have in common. American monk Thomas Merton, a Trappist and modern contemplative, spoke of this as "the dialogue between those who have kept their silences." Merton died in 1968 during a trip to Asia in which he met with the Dalai Lama and many other Buddhist monks. The past five decades have seen the flowering of the dialogue he envisioned among those pursuing the inner paths of spiritual discipline, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian. Today, there is an active Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, initiated by Catholic monks and nuns who have found monastic exchange visits with Buddhist monks and nuns to be mutually enriching and deepening. In July 1996, some twenty Buddhist monks and nuns, including the Dalai Lama, joined Christian monastics at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, where Thomas Merton had lived, for a remarkable week of dialogue and sharing along the spiritual path. Many gathered there again in 2002. The following year Catholic nuns visited Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple in Hacienda Heights, California and, in 2004, monks visited the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, California. Gethesemani III was held in 2008.

The Assisi World Day of Prayer, called by Pope John Paul II in 1986, brought world religious leaders to Assisi in Italy to pray for peace, and focused worldwide attention on the issue of interfaith worship. Some Christians questioned whether they could pray together with people of other faiths. To avoid controversy, Pope John Paul II nuanced the Vatican's intention: people would not come to pray together, but would come together to pray. In the end, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others from many traditions gathered in a large convocation, then went their separate ways to different parts of Assisi for their own forms of prayer or meditation. Assisi World Day of Prayer celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2011.

The question of interfaith worship has been less controversial in America than in Rome: in the past several decades, the number of interfaith services of worship, including prayer, has increased almost exponentially. Planning such services can be an important exercise in interreligious understanding, as all faith traditions do not share the same understanding of God or look at the world in the same way. All do not pray, and those that do may not think of prayer in the same way. Does a faith tradition have to compromise its beliefs in order to worship together? Is it appropriate for a Christian to mention Jesus Christ or to pray "in Jesus' name" if members of other traditions are present? Any attempt at interfaith worship must address these concerns. For many, interfaith worship is most authentic when each contributes in the ways and language distinctive to his or her own tradition: each listening, learning, and participating to the extent possible in the prayers of the others.

During the first Persian Gulf War, all across America there was a burst of local bridge-building, as many Jews and Christians reached out for the first time to the mosque across town. There were hundreds of interfaith prayer services, including one at the Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple in Hacienda Heights where people of all faiths gathered in the great hall dominated by Amida Buddha to pray for peace. In downtown Springfield, Massachusetts, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian clergy joined to pray for peace. Said one of the clergy, "We believe that Jews, Christians and Muslims have lived together peacefully and in harmony in the Greater Springfield area for many years. And we believe, just as we live together peacefully, our brothers in Israel and Gaza and the West Bank can live together in peace if they get to know each other as we have come to know each other here."

As national and world events unfold, prayers for peace, repentance, and understanding have joined Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in dozens of American cities and towns. Inspired by the

historic “handshake” between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and P.L.O. leader Yasser Arafat on September 13, 1993, Cleveland’s Temple Ner Tamid invited Muslim clergyman Imam Rahman to offer prayers during the Yom Kippur service. It was believed to be the first time anywhere in the world that a Muslim leader had participated in Yom Kippur prayers.

The tragedy of September 11th, 2001 sparked interfaith prayer services across the nation and brought many such efforts into the national spotlight. Thousands gathered in Yankee Stadium twelve days after the terrorist attacks for a multifaith prayer service led by Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Protestant, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and civic leaders as well as several celebrities including James Earl Jones, Oprah Winfrey, and Bette Midler.

These interfaith services, however, have not been without controversy. A Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor, the Reverend David H. Benke, was later suspended and then reinstated by his denomination for participating in the Yankee Stadium event after 9/11. A *New York Times* article quotes one church leader who articulated his concern: “To participate with pagans in an interfaith service and, additionally, to give the impression that there might be more than one God, is an extremely serious offense.” Ten years later, the planning committee for the commemoration service, also held at Yankee Stadium, drew criticism for not inviting participation by any religious leaders.

In 2012, thousands gathered in *gurdwaras,* churches, temples, and public squares across the country in the days and weeks following the tragic shooting at a *gurdwara* in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike came together to mourn those who were killed and to show support for their neighbors. In Boston’s Trinity Church in Copley Square, an estimated 1500 people gathered for “A Service Rooted in the Sikh Tradition: A Demonstration of Solidarity and Support” hosted by local Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups and featuring Sikh musicians from local *gurdwaras*. The event was followed by a *langar* meal offered by the Sikh community.

Another common occasion for interfaith worship and action is on national holidays: Thanksgiving, for instance, today is often construed as a religious, but non-sectarian holiday. A multitude of communities host interfaith Thanksgiving services, from the local maritime center in Port Townsend, Washington to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Assembly Hall in Salt Lake City’s Temple Square. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day increasingly is known as a day of interfaith worship and of community

service. In Atlanta, Georgia, the service commemorating and celebrating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has long been an interfaith service involving Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Bahá'ís, and Buddhists from the city. This service, like many others, often follow a pattern of sequential prayer, each in the style and distinctive vocabulary of his or her own tradition.

During interfaith services, people can come together to celebrate, to mourn, to commemorate, and also to protest. In 1995, in Brodheadsville, Pennsylvania, Hindus and Christians joined together at a Salesian Monastery for a special "Christmas *puja*." Holocaust Remembrance Day brought people together in September of 1992, in St. Louis, Missouri, where representatives of Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu communities joined Native Americans for an interfaith service that took place at a powwow. A shared opposition to the death penalty joined San Diego Buddhists, Christians, and Jews on the night before the 1992 scheduled execution of Robert Alton Harris, the first person to be executed in California in 25 years. California People of Faith, a non-profit whose mission is to end the death penalty in that state, regularly holds multifaith vigils; statements from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians, Buddhist, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, and Unitarian Universalist groups in support of abolishing the death penalty are catalogued on CPF's website. In 2007, the Brattleboro Area Interfaith Initiative in Vermont hosted a "Fast Day for Peace" on Columbus Day as a means of "rejecting the image of conquest and domination associated with the event." In 2011 and 2012, the national Occupy Movement often incorporated interfaith gatherings, establishing interfaith tents and hosting multi-faith prayer circles.

Finally, there are places in America that have been specifically built for interfaith worship and for use by different traditions, contributing in striking ways to the American architectural landscape. The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, housing fourteen paintings by American artist Mark Rothko, is dedicated to the vision of a world community; its doors are open to people of every faith. Downtown Dallas' Chapel of Thanksgiving, with its dramatic spiraling stained glass window, brings together people from all faiths to express what all have in common: a sense of gratitude for the gifts of life. College and university campuses, airports, and hospitals are increasingly finding ways of offering adaptable spaces to accommodate the increasing religious diversity of students, passengers, staff, and patients. A research team from the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom has catalogued many of these spaces in the United States and around the world. Their research, "Multifaith Spaces: Symptoms and Agents of Change" has been compiled as a traveling exhibit and website.