

The Importance of Interfaith Dialogue  
Remarks for Ramadan Dinner  
With our Muslim Neighbors and Friends  
The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of  
Columbia, South Carolina  
June 2, 2017  
The Rev. Jennie Ann Barrington, Interim Minister

Welcome, and thank you all for being here this evening. Unitarian Universalism has its historic roots in liberal Christianity, and the Protestant Reformation. But in the early 1800s, Unitarians and Universalists began to broaden their religious knowledge and outlook, to include the great religious traditions of the world, and also classical philosophy. Today Unitarian Universalists teach our children basic information about, and respect and tolerance for, the great religions and philosophies of the world. In so doing, we develop in them the ability to honor beliefs that are different from their own. We teach them that even though they may never adopt a certain set of different religious teachings, they can still understand and empathize with people who do embrace those teachings. That is a way of being in this multi-faith, multi-cultural world which all adults should strive to cultivate. We also teach our children the Golden Rule, as it is, in some form, part of all great world religions.

Of all religions within our contemporary inter-faith world, Islam may be the one most in need of wider understanding and tolerance. This need in the world today for inter-faith dialogue and understanding brings to mind the work of a teacher and author named Christopher Phillips, and his book, *The Six Questions of Socrates*. Phillips has facilitated discussions all around the world around Socrates' questions such as: "What is virtue?" "What is moderation?" "What is justice?" "What is courage?" and "What is goodness?" Phillips has recorded the insights from those discussions in his book. In each case, Phillips tried to understand the cultural background of the participants, and how that context had informed their ideal of how to live a virtuous life today. In his chapter on the question, "What is piety?" Phillips writes of a Muslim community in a Midwestern city, their tribulation in the wake of September 11, 2001, and how they overcame the animosity of their non-Muslim neighbors. Phillips writes of a Muslim man named Syed, who participated in the discussion with his wife and young daughter. Syed said that piety is right conduct in service to God, and that a big part of that right conduct is reaching out to your neighbor. "After September 11<sup>th</sup> [Syed said], whenever neighbors saw me, they'd close their doors immediately... They wished we'd just go away. This was very hard for us. We'd lived in refugee camps for two years before coming here from the African continent, escaping the civil war in Somalia.

We thought we'd left hostility behind. [Syed said] I have a good job at a printing press, my child is getting a good education, my wife has been happy to be resettled here. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, once again we felt like we would never be able to live in peace and safety, in a welcoming environment...'

Then one day his wife asked him, 'What have we done to be good neighbors?' He was shocked and asked her, 'What haven't we done? We work hard, play by the rules, never cause trouble. What more could anyone want?' His wife then said to him, 'There's more to being a good neighbor than that. Being a good neighbor is . . . being neighborly. It's reaching out to others, especially in difficult times... What have we done to show them that we care about them, and put at ease their fears about us?' Syed said, 'At first, I wouldn't accept what she said. But then I began to wonder: Have I conducted myself piously, as God would want, toward my neighbors-- in a way that would build love and trust rather than fear and suspicion?'

Syed decided that his wife was right; he hadn't been a good neighbor. 'We all have a piece of God within us [he said], and our highest service is bringing out this piece of God, this pure goodness, of others. When we do that, we further reveal the goodness within ourselves. So [he said], I began to think, how can I practice compassion?' Syed decided to hold a cookout. At first his friends thought he was

nuts. But when he told them about his conversation with his wife, he won them over, and they agreed to help. “We put signs in our yards announcing the cookout [his friend said]. And every time we saw neighbors on the sidewalk, we’d approach them. [Most smiled] when we told them what we wanted to do... It was a big success. About thirty people came. Our children played together... And even those who didn’t come, found out about the cookout from those who did come. Since then [he said], most people in our neighborhood have been much friendlier. Now we’re planning a ‘friendship walk’ to our mosque. It all started with reaching out to our neighbors [he said]... We obeyed the Quran, where it says... that Muslims must ‘take part in the good and forbid the wrong.’ This is a type of piety we can practice in our everyday lives, by having cookouts and friendship walks, and so building good while preventing wrong.” [end of quote] In that same spirit, I envision our conversations and socializing will build understanding and empathy that will extend far beyond this evening and these walls. Bless you all.