



Interfaith Relations Newsletter

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana
Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations

“Night of Power”

On Oct. 8, Religious Communities Fast to End War and Violence

Leaders from many religious communities have issued a call for Americans to join in fasting from dawn to dusk on Monday, October 8 to call for an end to the Iraq War. On this day, people of faith in local communities across our nation will act as catalysts to transform the meaning of the day from one of “conquest to community and from violence to reverence.”



Rabbi Arthur Waskow

“This war must end!” say the religious leaders in their statement about the interfaith fast. For Muslims, October 8th leads up to the “Night of Power” the holiest night of Ramadan. They invite you to join with millions of other Americans by organizing joint interfaith events in your local community on October 8th, for fasting and breaking our fast together as we covenant together to live out the deepest calling in each of our traditions – the desire for justice and for peace for all people.



Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed

“We must end the shattering of Iraqi and American lives by offering American generosity and support – but not control – for international and nongovernmental efforts to assist Iraqis in making peace and rebuilding their country, while swiftly and safely bringing home all American troops.

Just as Isaiah called the People of Israel to hear the Yom Kippur fast as God's call to feed the hungry, just as Jesus fasted in the wilderness, just as Christians through Lenten fasting and Muslims through Ramadan fasting have focused on spiritual transformation, just as Mohandas Gandhi, Cesar Chavez and others drew on fasting to change the course of history, so we call on all our communities of faith to engage in fasting as a path toward inner spiritual transformation and outward social transformation.

American culture, society, and policy are addicted to violence at home and overseas. In our time, the hope of a decent future is endangered by an unnecessary, morally abhorrent, and disastrous war. Ending this war can become the first step toward a policy that embodies a deeper, broader sense of generosity and community at home and in the world.”

Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center, Dr. Sayyid M. Sayeed of the Islamic Society of North America, Rev. Bob Edgar General Secretary and Rev. Michael Livingston, President of the National Council of Churches, Jean Stoken of Pax Christi, Dr. Tarunjit Singh Butalia, Moderator of Religions for Peace USA, Jim Winkler of the United Methodist Board for Church and Society, Rick Ufford-Chase of Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and Christian Peace Witness are among the religious leaders who have endorsed this event.



Rev. Dr. Bob Edgar



Dr. Tarunjit Butalia

This fall, in an unusual convergence, many of our faith traditions share a season of sacred self-assessment and self-transformation. This holy season includes the month of Ramadan and the Night of Power (Islam); the High Holy Days and Sukkot (Judaism); the Feast Day of Francis of Assisi and Worldwide Communion Sunday (Christianity) and Pavarana Day (Buddhism).

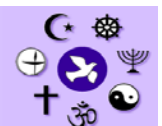
The following are suggestions about how local communities can participate on that day.

Pre-October 8th Events:

During the month of September, we will prepare and publicize educational material that religious leaders can use to prepare their congregations to appropriately relate with religious communities other than their own, and to learn the spiritual discipline of fasting as a transformational exercise. A press conference in Washington DC near the end of September by religious leaders will bring the events to public awareness.

Individuals and communities are invited to begin the discipline by fasting one day a week, from now until October 8.

Sundown, Sunday, October 7: Gather in intentionally interfaith events across the United States to pray and to break bread together.



On Monday, October 8th

Have a simple meal before dawn, committing to fast throughout the day as a sign of your commitment to move our core values from conquest to community and from violence to reverence.

- ◆ **During the day:** organize public vigils, inviting community leaders and elected officials and candidates for the presidency to join us as we commit to take immediate action to end the war. In Washington DC, religious leaders will gather to fast together and engage in a public action to draw attention to the nation-wide events that will take place that day.
- ◆ **At sunset:** Gather together in interfaith settings to break the fast by eating together as a sign of our commitment to work together for peace and an end to violence. This shared meal will be a sign of our covenant with one another – as individuals and as communities - to stand against the war in Iraq, and to work with one another to stand against violence in our communities and around the world. (Muslims will have large scale gatherings that night because of the Night of Power. Shared break-fast meals should be scheduled taking account of these gatherings.)



We encourage participants to continue to reach out to elected officials and candidates for congress and the presidency, inviting them to fast with us, break bread with us, pray with us, vigil with us, and publicly express their commitment to end this war. We encourage those who live in states in which primary elections are held to use that opportunity to engage with the presidential candidates in their public appearances about their commitment to end the war

Suggestions to Deepen Our Witness:

- ◆ Following the gathering on Oct 7th evening, plan events such as Teach-Ins that may extend to all night events to pray, study nonviolence in our different faith traditions, study sacred texts together, and witness to our opposition to war and violence.
- ◆ Extend the fast to twenty-four hours – beginning with our interfaith meal together on Sunday evening, or for Christians, beginning on Sunday morning with the celebration of World Communion.
- ◆ Gather on Monday morning, October 8th, for an inspirational public event that will both highlight the issues and provide motivation as we begin the fast.
- ◆ Broaden our witness to insist that we stand against all use of torture, as well as to highlight our grave concerns about the growing violence on the streets of our cities and in mass shootings across the country, and about the way in which the media's obsession with grotesque acts of violence undercuts the most fundamental values of our faith.

Post Events -- A Season of Commitment:

As a practice of our covenant, we encourage local communities to continue in regular fasting, praying and holding vigils for peace and to take specific actions through the election cycle to stand together against the war in Iraq and against all of the ways in which violence is destroying our communities.

The Missiology of Jamestown 1607 and Its Implications for 2007 and Beyond

Plans for a Jamestown Missiology consultation are moving forward. Scheduled for May 28-29, 2008 at Regent University School of Theology, it is a joint project between our Interfaith Relations Commission, Virginia Council of Churches and Regent University. It will feature ten academics: among them Missiologists, Theologians, Historians and Legal scholars. An invited audience will participate in the discussion. We expect that the end result will be a book.

The events of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 mark the beginning of a long history of invasion, exploitation, denigration and the loss of Native American land and religious traditions. Jamestown also marks the port of entry of slavery and forced migration.

What ideologies motivated these explorers? What missiologies provided church support and legitimacy to the invasion and exploitation? How do we develop missiologies that are more appropriate to the values of the gospel? These are among the questions that the consultation will address.

Jewish Christian Leaders' Dialogue Table

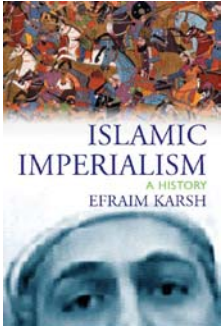
Jewish and Christian leaders representing many mainstream Jewish organizations and many Christian communions convened on July 9, to re-start the dialogue table. The group re-counted the blessings of the previous table, articulated its learnings and set an agenda for the future. They agreed to meet three times a year and to consider a joint trip to the Middle East in 2008 with other leaders in our organizations. The group agreed to consider carefully, the intersection between theology and politics understanding that while Israel and Palestine are important to our conversation it neither encompasses all of our Middle East concerns, nor our social justice concerns, and the question of Christian Zionism.

Muslim Christian Leaders' Dialogue Table

When the Interfaith Relations Commission meets in Dearborn, MI on Sept. 20th, some of its members will meet with Muslim counterparts to plan and prepare for a Muslim Christian Leaders' Dialogue Table. Our intention is that when the leaders gather, it will be to a table jointly convened by Christian and Muslim partners.

Understanding or Ideology: Why Did the IRD Spend Millions on Karsh's *Islamic Imperialism*?

In April this year, the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD) — a far-right advocacy organization — sent a “gift” to 100,000 Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic churches in the United States. The gift was a copy of the book *Islamic Imperialism*, by Efraim Karsh (2006: Yale University Press). It was accompanied by a letter from the IRD president, James Tonkovich, affirming his belief that the book is “useful for gaining a



greater understanding and thus greater wisdom in approaching the world in which we all live.”

Yale University Press lists the book at \$17. Unless the IRD got a high-volume discount, the cost of 100,000 copies comes to \$1.7 million, plus roughly another \$150,000 for postage. Why would the IRD spend such a large amount of money for such a project?

According to Cynthia Astle of the United Methodist online newsletter UM Nexus, the IRD will say only that “a donor interested in the project” paid for the purchase of 100,000 copies of the book to be mailed throughout the United States and Canada. She quotes the IRD President saying that the gift is intended to help educate mainline Protestant and Catholic clergy and seminaries in the United States and Canada about “the history of Islam in light of growing radicalism.”

If this is indeed the IRD’s intention, the book fails. It is not geared to educate, but to persuade in service of an ideology that seeks to draw the harshest of divisions between people.

Christians must understand that Muslim individuals, families, groups and networks are as diverse as any other religious group. Bruce Lincoln, an Islamic scholar at Duke University reminds us that “Those who self-identify as Muslims may be pious or mystical, high-minded or ritual bound, educated or illiterate, cosmopolitan or parochial. There is no single Islam and no essential, unchanging Muslim reflex. There can be, and probably are, more Muslim secularists than fundamentalists.” Right wing organizations like the IRD are among the main culprits who refuse to see this complexity and a small but vocal class of writers such as Efraim Karsh provide them a veneer of academic respectability.

Karsh’s thesis — Islam is nothing but persistent yet failed imperial ambition — is simplistic. Similarly, and with one sentence he dismisses Christian empire building: “Apart from the Third Reich, Christendom had lost its imperial ambitions by the mid-twentieth century.” I only have space to address these two sweeping generalizations.

- ◆ Right at the outset, Karsh begins to establish his thesis of Muhammad’s imperial ambitions. He draws a distinction between other conquered people’s ambitions and Muhammad’s: “Neither North African Berbers fighting their Islamic conquerors nor twentieth-century Third World movements resisting European colonialism aspired to conquer the homeland of their imperial masters. Yet . . . this is

precisely what Muhammad asked of his followers.” (p. 4) Karsh bases this information on an unidentified seventh century Islamic leader who was apparently trying to find justification for his own imperial ambitions by making reference to the Prophet. However, neither the Qur’an nor Muhammad’s authoritative biographies mention conquering the homeland of imperial masters. Indeed, Mecca and Medina were independent and had no imperial masters.

But unable to sustain his premise, by the end of Chapter One Karsh backs down, and Muhammad not only sounds much less imperialistic, but rather, diplomatic. As a military leader the Prophet did wage war, but he did enter into alliances. A peace treaty with a Christian prince at the Northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba did provide protection and freedom of worship for Christians. Karsh admits that “it is unlikely that Muhammad had imagined the full scope of Islam’s future expansion, let alone planned it.” (p.22)

- ◆ Karsh’s ideological bent becomes obvious in his treatment of Christian imperialism. Christian universalism, he says “was originally conceived in purely spiritual terms that made a clear distinction between God and Caesar.” (p.6) This ignores the long history of triumphalistic imperialism of Christian history. Indeed atrocities such as the crusades and the European colonial movement were theologically legitimized imperial projects, requiring today’s Christians to take a hard look at Christian theologies that legitimized such violence. Karsh’s statement that “If Christendom was slower than Islam in marrying religious universalism with political imperialism, it was faster in shedding both notions,” (p.7) his acknowledgement of the Third Reich’s excesses notwithstanding, is totally discredited by the theological legitimacy that is provided to the present war in Iraq by Christian conservatives.

Have Muslims over many centuries yearned to see their faith adopted worldwide? Yes, but so have Christians. Have they launched invasions to expand their territory? Sometimes, but so have Christians. When religion is used to provide legitimacy to political power it is often misused. This is unfortunately also true of Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and other religious communities. That does not make Islam singularly imperialistic. But in order to paint this picture of Islam, Karsh has to cast his argument in a simplistic reading of history.

This therefore is a word of caution to my Christian colleagues. What you received from the IRD is not a gift that is intended to educate. Here are some great resources that you can use to educate yourself and your church about Islam. Marston Speight’s *God Is One: The Way of Islam* ([Friendship Press](#)) includes a study guide for churches. John Esposito’s *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* ([Oxford University Press](#)) is a masterpiece. We also have institutions of learning who have specialized in helping Christians to understand Islam and have produced many resources. They include: Hartford Seminary’s [McDonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations](#), and Georgetown University’s [Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding](#).

Resources for Interfaith Relations

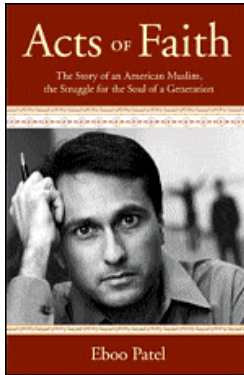
Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation

Eboo Patel (2007: Beacon Press)

“In order to save ourselves, we need to save others.” This is one of the more powerful messages that rings throughout this courageous and compelling memoir. It must be required reading, and is equally important for pastors as well as politicians, interfaith practitioners as well as young people. Anyone who

values the promise of pluralism upon which this nation is founded and desperately needed in this violent world, will find this an inspiring book.

To interfaith practitioners of my generation, who still like to do our dialogues in seminars, conferences and dinners, the message is stark and clear — enough already! Do something that will make a change in the world, particularly to reach out to young people.



I visited Eboo in his office at the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, days after the terrorist bombings in London on July 7, 2005. Most of that visit was devoted to unpacking this one comment he made with a deep sense of sadness mixed with an infectious passion, even before we sat down: “We didn’t get to those young people soon enough.” He unpacks it even further in this book: religious totalitarians got to them before religious pluralists could. Indeed many of the terrorists in today’s world are young people between 15 and 30.

This book is about “how some young people become champions of religious pluralism while others become the foot soldiers of religious totalitarianism. Its thesis is simple: influences matter, programs count, mentors make a difference, institutions leave their mark.”

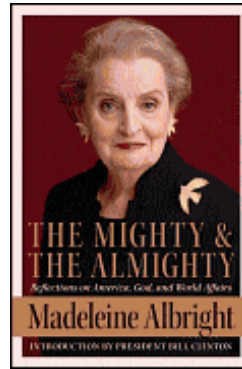
To prove that point, Patel, draws on his own story. Growing up a second generation Indian Muslim in the Chicago suburb of Glen Ellyn, his story weaves through his struggles to belong in the dominant white culture where religion didn’t matter. It weaves through college in Champaign-Urbana where his explorations into radical politics became tempered by his relationships with a community of people at the Catholic Worker Movement. Later at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, his ideas for building a youth movement came into clearer view. It is a story that weaves through many mentors, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist, including the Dalai Lama who inspired him to seek the depths of his Muslim faith.

What led one young man to passionately embrace pluralism while other young people may get radicalized into violence? At the end, the book’s thesis counts: influences matter, programs count, mentors make a difference, institutions leave their mark. One such institution is Interfaith Youth Core (www.ifyc.org) which Eboo Patel serves as Executive Director. They deserve our encouragement and support.

The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs

Madeline Albright (2006: HarperCollins)

At a time when most conflicts around the world have some religious basis, the role of religion on diplomacy has become increasingly important. Once the top US diplomat, Madeleine Albright sets out to elucidate this principle in her book.



Why have so many practitioners of foreign policy sought to separate religion from the world of politics? “To liberate logic from beliefs that transcend logic,” she writes. It is hard enough to divide land between two groups on the basis of legal or economic equity; it is far harder if one or both claim that the land in question is given to them by God. Even though diplomats ignore religious motivations, they do not disappear writes Albright, insightfully. “More often,

they lie dormant only to rise up again at the least convenient moment.”

Foreign policy experts have at their disposal experts in economics, nonproliferation and arms control. Yet, they do not have similar expertise available for integrating religious principles in diplomacy, laments Albright.

She also examines the impact of religion on America’s view of itself, the rise of the Christian right, the Bush administration’s successes and failures in responding to 9/11, the challenges posed by the war in Iraq and the importance of understanding Islam. She condemns those of all faiths who exploit religious fervor to create divisions or enhance their own power.

To be effective, US policymakers must understand the power of religion in motivating others and in coloring how American actions are perceived. Religion and politics are inseparable, she writes, but their partnership, when properly harnessed, can be a force for justice and peace.



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