

A glimpse of oneness for a change

Joan Chittister | Nov. 26, 2008 From Where I Stand

The looks on their faces as they went round and round me were something I had never seen before in my religious life. I realized as they all went by that something very different had just happened in this assembly. The Sufi drum beat an even pace while the group sang "La-a-illa-ha" over and over again, then, alternatively, "al-le-lu-i-a," and then "Amazing Grace." All of them sung rhythmically, softly, persistently -- full heartedly. Which a person could surely expect of Sufis.

But the people at this zikr, dancing and chanting around the Sufis who were leading it, were not members of one of Islam's Sufi orders -- religious groups much like Christian religious orders around the world. They were Buddhist monks, Jewish rabbis, Hindu swamis, Christian monks, Muslim imams, Indian Sun Dancers and lay practitioners of all the world's great contemplative traditions. This zikr, this particular sufi devotion of praise, was suddenly a universal one, truly a prayer of all these peoples from all these separate traditions praying one same prayer -- but differently.

It was a moment in the spiritual life not to be forgotten too quickly. It was, a Christian mystic might have said in earlier centuries, "a foretaste of heaven." It was, at very least, a glimpse into what real religion could be -- should be. It was a moment of real contemplative oneness.

While the world around us is turning upside down politically, economically, and socially these days -- trying to figure out what "change" really is, what it means to be "pragmatic," how to get out of the economic dry well into which we have fallen--there were clearly other changes going on at the same time. Cataclysmic ones.

These changes, these religious ones, are not charged with the same kind of urgency, of course, as the political or economic ones. They are neither as obvious nor as defined as bail-outs and stimulus packages, of course. These changes are even under the radar in most instances -- but definitely here. And it is not the idea of religion that most people grew up with in the 20th century.

This new world of religion showed itself in Aspen last week at a conference sponsored by the Global Peace Initiative of Women titled "Gathering the Spiritual Voices of American: To Deepen Our Knowing of Oneness and Our Compassion as a Nation." (GPIW.org [1]) The purpose of the conference was, the program said clearly, to be "A National Reflection with America's Religious and Spiritual Leaders." The group had been called together the day after the national election to consider what it means to move from "Contemplative Wisdom to Compassionate Action."

Over 100 recognized voices of religion's great contemplative traditions came together at a time of great change to ask themselves what change would be demanded of them, as well, as a result of the social changes going on around them. As one of the questions to the group put it, "What is the call of our time and how must we (as contemplatives) respond?"

Addressing such a question to professed contemplatives of any particular spiritual path might seem a strange one to those who think that the "contemplative" is one who seeks to escape the world. But to those who

understand contemplation to be the spiritual commitment to come to see the world as God sees the world, the conference and its question make serious sense. Some of Catholicism's greatest contemplatives, for instance, Catherine of Siena, Therese of Avila, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, were also its greatest activists.

What does God want at times such as this of those who spend their lives transcending ideologies, immersed in the mystic traditions of the various faiths, more given to the spiritual dimensions of life than to the maintaining of religious institutions themselves?

From one point of view, the questions were actually pretty standard for religious types. But this time the difference was not so much the answers they came up with -- as impacting as these could be-- as it was the fact that they came to the conference at all. Came together at all. Came to talk about the healing function of contemplation and compassion in the world rather than about church documents or canons or scriptures or customs that are the hallmark of each.

So surprising was the gathering and its focus, in fact, that a public seminar had to be added to the private consultation just to accommodate some of the people who had heard about the conference and wanted to attend it themselves.

The struggle between 'red states' and 'blue states' in the 'United States' may be a political problem but, if truth were told, 'oneness' is not something religion has been particularly good at over time either. Religions and religious professionals have been far more devoted over the years to creating Absolutes of themselves. They routinely cast other religions and their scriptures and prayers and beliefs into hellfire. They persecuted and oppressed and either forced people into their own religious tribe or hounded them out of it. They made converts at the end of a sword and divided families and called one another pagans and infidels. Many still do.

But those attitudes were not here in these people at this conference. Young women rabbis with orthodox rabbis beside them led the shabbat prayers. Native Americans did the sun-up ceremony. Buddhists chanted. Christians said traditional prayer forms and imams led Friday prayer. And together they all did the zikr. It was the look of common spiritual transcendence and contemplative oneness that I saw on the faces that circled around me.

The Global Peace Initiative of Women works to reduce conflict around the world by calling religious leaders to work to mitigate its local dangers. Where better a place to start than in the contemplative center of religion itself? If churches and mosques and temples won't do it -- if there is anything to religion at all -- someone must.

Oh, before everyone left, they had made some resolutions, of course. Conferences always do. (You can read the [press release on the Global Peace Initiative Web site](#) [2].) But in a sense, these monastics and rabbis and swamis and sufi and Native Americans had already accomplished the greatest thing of all. They had come together -- and promised to do it again.

Eliminating barriers between the traditions, modeling the 'oneness' religion talks about, they decided, is what is demanded of religious at this moment in history.

From where I stand, that would be a real revolution. That might in the long run do as much or more to really change the world than economic structures ever will.

Editor's Note: Here's another program Joan Chittister is involved with: [Rabbi recruits Catholics for new 'Marshall Plan'](#) [3].

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