

## Weaknesses of the Golden Rule

(originally titled: “*Am I not welcome?*”: *The Dark Side of the Golden Rule*)

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Good morning. My name is Don Frew.

As mentioned after breakfast, this talk isn't really *Weaknesses of the Golden Rule*; the title in the program book is an error. It's actually “*Am I not welcome?*”: *The Dark Side of the Golden Rule* and it addresses many of the same concerns brought up by Rabbi David Kunin and Jason Smith on yesterday's panel.

### Introduction

I think I bring an unusual perspective to this topic.

On the one hand... I'm about as much of an interfaith movement “insider” as one can be. I joined the Berkeley Area Interfaith Council in 1985 and have been doing interfaith work on behalf of my faith tradition for over 25 years. I serve on the Board of Directors of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio and on the Global Council of the United Religions Initiative. I represented my religious organization, the Covenant of the Goddess, at all of the modern Parliaments of the World's Religions, where I was invited to join the Parliament's Assembly of the World's Religious & Spiritual Leaders in 1998.

On the other hand... I'm a Witch. That's about as much of an “outsider” as one can be. There are still interfaith councils in the US that won't allow Witches to join. Even worse, there are many places in the US where people *still* lose pets, jobs, child custody, or even their lives for being Witches. So the topic of inclusion and exclusion in interfaith is one that is dear to my heart.

### Illusion of Similarity

Usually, representatives of different faiths come together in interfaith work for the first time around those aspects of our faiths that we have in common. It's always easier to focus on what we share than on what is different. Unfortunately, when we focus *too much* on those similarities we weave an illusion for ourselves that those similarities *define* what it is to be religious. This illusion results in “universal statements”.

Examples include:

\* “We all worship the same God.”

(You know, there's a T-shirt for sale downstairs at this very NAIN Connect with the statement “One God, Many Names” on the front, surrounded by the symbols of many faith traditions.)

\* “All religions are really paths to the same truth.”

...and...

\* “All religions have the Golden Rule.”

In reality, religion on Earth is more diverse than we can imagine and it is almost impossible to come up with a statement that is true about *all* faith traditions.

Years ago, when I joined the Berkeley Area Interfaith Council as the elected representative from Covenant of the Goddess, I was greeted with a barrage of assumptions about religion...

“Whom do you worship?” they asked.

“Well, no one really.”

“Well then, to whom do you pray?”

“Well, we don't pray, as such.”

“Well, what do you believe?”

“We don't really have beliefs.”

“What is your Bible?”

“We don't have one.”

“Where are your churches?”

“We don't have any.”

“Who is your prophet or leader?”

“We don’t have one of those, either.”

“How can you achieve salvation, then?”

“We don’t even have the concept of salvation.”

And so on, and so on...

All of which gave the impression that we were either not really a religion, or at least were a seriously inadequate one.

Half-baked, you might say.

Nothing could be further from the truth<sup>1</sup>, but this isn’t a “What is Wicca?” talk so I’ll save my explanations of those questions for private conversations or the Q&A time after the talk.<sup>2</sup>

The problem was with the *questions* and the *assumptions* about religion inherent within them.

Whenever we make universal statements about religions we run into two problems:

- 1) We are almost certainly wrong.
- 2) We exclude those faiths who don’t agree with the statement, or worse, we subvert those faiths in their efforts to be taken seriously and to belong.

### The Golden Rule

My faith tradition does not have a statement like the Golden Rule. Instead, we have a complex web of teachings about ethical behavior, relating to the immanence of the Divine and the interconnectedness of all things, and the responsibility that flows from these truths.

What simple maxims we *do* have – as “abbreviations”, you might say, of those teachings – are what’s called the Wiccan Rede or “An it harm none, do as ye will.” and the popular “All acts of magic should be acts of love.” ... neither of which are really the same as the Golden Rule.

The closest thing we have to the Golden Rule is a general awareness that living in dynamic engagement with the world means that, inevitably, “what goes around comes around”.

But that’s *still* not the same thing.

One result of this is that members of my community – widely considered the fourth largest religion in the US – hear that Rachael and I are attending a conference titled “Many People, Many Faiths, One Common Principle: The Golden Rule” and wonder why were here. They assume that such a conference *at best* has nothing to do with their religion and *at worst* would exclude them from attending. It doesn’t help that the Golden Rule has been, and is still being, used to justify proselytizing to my community.

“Since I would want someone to witness Christ to me,” the reasoning goes, “that other person over there will obviously appreciate it when I witness to them.” This may sound like the kind of mental gymnastics that characterize so many objections to the Golden Rule, but for us it is a very present reality.

When I attended the National Religious Broadcasters convention in Washington DC several years ago, I endured at least 50 attempts to convert me each day over 3 days. Even when I was away from the convention and at the Smithsonian Institution, people from the convention whom I would bump into would start witnessing. Many people quoted the Golden Rule to me as part of the lead-in to their spiel.

To Witches, the biggest problem with the Golden Rule is that it encourages its followers to project their *own* beliefs onto others, rather than listen to those others to hear what might be different. This has been addressed in previous talks here. One problem for us that *hasn’t* been addressed is that the Golden Rule assumes an essential *sameness* of the actors involved, i.e. that they are both human.

For us, the whole world is a living thing and all of its parts alive and capable of being in relationships with us. We believe that such a relationship with the natural world is an important part of saving the planet from environmental collapse. How do I apply the Golden Rule to my relationship with a tree? Or with a rock?

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<sup>1</sup> The section from “Years ago, when I joined the Berkeley Area Interfaith Council...” to “Nothing could be further from the truth,” is repeated from my talk at the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions, Pagans in Interfaith Dialogue”.

<sup>2</sup> Or you can see rest of my 1993 talk on line at the Patheos website at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Pagans-in-Interfaith-Dialogue.html>

We are *so* different – even in things as simple as sensory apparatus – that there is virtually no way of understanding the other in the way that so many here have said is *necessary* for application of the Golden Rule. How do I figure out what a tree “wants” to do or be done to it? Does a rock “want” at all? The necessary tools, summarized by Harry Gensler in “K I T A” (“Know, Imagine, Test, Act”), don’t apply. *Our* ethics offer us guidance on this, but the Golden Rule does not... at least not for us.

Over breakfast, when we thought we would be presenting together, Harry tried to convince me that Witches *do* have a version of the Golden Rule and tried to lead me through the logic he used to reinterpret our views and statements as *really* being variations of the Golden Rule. It’s perfectly fine that *he* thinks that we have a version of the Golden Rule and just don’t realize it, but it misses the point. If the followers of my faith tradition do not see the Golden Rule as part of our tradition, it is not the place of *any* interfaith representative to try to convince us that we’re wrong. This would be like a very inclusive Christian trying to convince us that we *really do* worship the same God they do, we just don’t know it. (In an earlier age, assumptions about a natural “evolution” of religions from “primitive” animism to the apex of monotheism justified just such a condescending attitude towards the “poor, benighted Heathens”.)

If the interfaith movement wants to be inclusive, then it has to approach and engage religions *on their own terms*, not try to force them into pre-existing concepts of what really is or isn’t a religion.

### Inclusive Language

I was involved in the writing of the Charter of the United Religions Initiative and we realized early on that even using the word “religion” was keeping people away – people we wanted at the table, like the practitioners of the many indigenous traditions who absolutely rejected the term “religion.”

At one point, I found myself working in a small group with Rosalia Gutierrez, an indigenous Kolla person from Argentina. She was strongly objecting to the use of the words “religion” and “sacred” (as in “sacred space”) in the URI Charter. While I could understand that there might be problems with the word “religion”, I couldn’t understand what the problem might be with the word “sacred”. I engaged in a deeper discussion with her translator and discovered that in Spanish, at least as she understood it in Argentina, “religion” referred specifically to the Christian faith and “sacred” meant “things you find in a church”, so neither of these words related to her experience of indigenous spirituality at all.

Once we cleared this up, and after *many* more similar conversations, the URI ended up with “religions, spiritual expressions, and indigenous traditions” as the most inclusive language it could find, and it’s worked for 11 years so far.

### Insidious Pressure

The most insidious aspect of universal statements is that they sometimes create pressures to change *within* religious traditions.

It’s no surprise, and it makes perfect sense, that the dominant religions in the U.S. dominate the interfaith scene. They had the money and administrative structures to back up the desire to do interfaith work, and so were able to create virtually all of the major interfaith organizations. But you can’t be the *dominant* anything without getting into issues of *dominance*. Judaeo-Christianity has been the dominant politico-economic force on the planet for over 100 years. Everyone else has had to play by their terms.

In the early encounter of Buddhism and Hinduism with Christianity, the Buddhists and Hindus quickly learned how to use the *language* of the colonial powers to describe their religious traditions in terms that would be understood *by* and acceptable *to* the colonial powers, even if that language really did a disservice to the religious ideas being discussed. This led to concepts like *atman* being translated as “soul” and *Brahman* as “God”, when these terms really mean something quite different from what is suggested by the Western / Christian words.

Even Islam went through a similar process with its Abrahamic siblings, resulting in ideas of Allah in the West that have a greater similarity to Christian ideas of God and little to do with the monistic concept of the One that is a more accurate description.

Over a hundred years of such miscommunication has resulted in an imaginary conception of similarity between the so-called “Big Five” religions. I have found in my interfaith work that, after sharing our personal practices and personal stories of encounters with the Divine, my Muslim and Hindu friends often confide that their practices and their conceptions of the Divine are much closer to mine than they are to those of Christians.

The *terms* used in English to describe Islam and Hinduism may be Christian ones, but the underlying concepts are often very different... much more so than most Christians realize. The illusion of similarity among the “Big Five” has reinforced the belief that it is possible to make universal statements about religions.

I believe that the early influence of the Perennial Philosophy upon the interfaith movement made matters worse. To explain a whole intellectual movement in a few sentences is impossible, but I'll try to summarize as it relates to the interfaith movement. I'm sure folks here can correct me if I oversimplify things.

In a nutshell, the Perennial Philosophy – as described by such writers as Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Fritjof Schuon – was a school of thought throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century that held that all the religions of the world were different manifestations of a single Divine truth. Of course, the Perennialist writers only addressed the “major” or “Big Five” religions and pointed to similarities in their sacred texts as proof of their assertions. These similarities and the underlying truth of which they were manifestations were called “the Perennial Philosophy”. Faith traditions *without* a sacred text were excluded, and treated as not *really* being religions.

Eventually, the encounter with indigenous spiritualities – especially those of the Native North Americans – led to a respect for the wisdom of such traditions and the creation of a new category, “the Primordial Wisdom.” The Perennialist view was revised to say, in essence, that “native peoples, living a life in tune with Nature, experience the Divine directly through the natural worlds, which manifested as the Primordial Wisdom, but ‘civilized’ people are cut off from Nature and so require a ‘revelation’ to understand the Divine. These revelations are the Perennial Philosophy.”

This dichotomous view of the religions of the world, growing and developing alongside the interfaith movement over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had a shaping force on the interfaith movement, especially through the Schuon's book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. It still holds sway over much of the movement.

Where does that leave folks like me?

On the one hand, we practice a spiritual path that is very similar to that of indigenous people around the world. On the other hand, we are “civilized”, usually white, products of Western culture. We don't fall into the neat categories offered by the Perennialists.

I would often find it disturbing at Berkeley Area Interfaith Council functions, or the early Gatherings of Blessings at the Interfaith Center at the Presidio, that participants from other faiths would be suspicious of Witches doing the same practices as indigenous people. I couldn't get over the feeling that what was acceptably “quaint” when ethnic minorities did it was somehow seen as inappropriate when white people did the same thing. We crossed boundaries, and this pushed the envelope of what was acceptable in interfaith councils.

Even today, it is very intimidating for any alternative religion, especially the Earth Religions, (including Neopagans like me and indigenous practitioners), to approach the interfaith community. In an effort to be accepted, to be taken seriously as a *real* religion, there is tremendous pressure to conform to the expectations of the interfaith movement expressed in “universal statements” about religion.

At the 1993 Parliament, all of the Sponsors – of which the Covenant of the Goddess was one – were invited to send their “leader” to the Assembly of the World's Religious & Spiritual Leaders. Like many faith traditions, we don't have “leaders” *per se*. We have Elders – people recognized for their experience – of which there are *many*. But in order to participate in the Assembly, we had to come up with a “leader”.

While we discussed this, the one thing we could agree on is that whoever we picked should be someone who *wasn't already* being treated as a “leader” of the Witches by the public at large, someone like the Wiccan author Starhawk, for example. In the end, we picked a wonderful older woman named Deborah Ann Light, who had never been in a position of prominence before this, and she represented us very, very well.

We feared a problem that some of the Native American tribes experienced. Individuals who were not “leaders”, but who were prominent Elders, were sent to the Assembly. They returned to their tribes with the recognition of the outside world as “leaders”. This enhanced the individuals' standing *within* the tribes and in some cases *created* leaders where before there were none. Native American traditions have especially been subverted in this way due to the extreme difference in power and influence between them and the larger, Western religions.

It is now not at all uncommon to hear Native Americans use “God” to describe their conception of the Divine oneness of Nature, or to put forth relatively minor or insignificant rules of conduct as their version of the Golden Rule – which now elevates the standing of such rules within their traditions. Whether or not we think such changes are improvements, it's not *our* place to make them, or to create the socio-economic pressure that leads to them. Accepting faith traditions for who they are, on their own terms, *must* be our approach if we are to be truly inclusive.

#### “Flip Side” of Universal Statements

As a side note, while I billed this talk as relating to “the *dark side* of the Golden Rule”, I'd like to bring up that there is what might be called a “flip side” to the “universal statements” made in interfaith. We often excuse the perceived failings of one or more faith traditions by saying, “Well, of course *all* religions...

...claim to be the only true religion.”

- or ...have language condemning other faiths.”
- or ...have language condoning violence against others.”
- or ...place women in subordinate roles.”

... and so forth.

No, “*all* religions” don’t. Wicca doesn’t. I’m sure others don’t, as well.

This was driven home to me when, as a member of the Parliament Assembly, I was asked by Dr. Gerald Barney to answer his 40 or so “Millennium Questions” about what each religion had to say about entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The questions included ones like:

\* How does your faith tradition address the second-class status of women in the tradition?

The majority of our clergy are women and most covens are led by women.

\*How does your faith tradition address the conflict between religion & science?

We see no conflict. What science tells us about the natural world tells us more about the Divine. While many of us know, respect, and enjoy telling the various creation stories of the many myth cycles of the world, we have no single creation myth other than the currently accepted scientific view of the origins of the universe.

The questions went on like this, and I had to keep giving differently elaborated forms of “Does not apply.” My point is that negative “universal statements” we make are no more likely to be true than the positive ones.

### Engaging Exclusivists

On yesterday’s panel about challenges facing the interfaith movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jason Smith brought up the importance of engaging what he called “exclusivists” and bringing them into our movement. By “exclusivists” I believe he meant those who believe that their religion is the only true or right one, typically (though not exclusively) found in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

(And again, I heard someone on yesterday’s panel say that *every* religion has that exclusivist strain. Once again, mine does not. Our oldest texts assert that *all* religions that result in healthy, happy lives for their followers are just fine and different manifestations of the Divine. By the way, I’ve also never met an exclusivist Taoist.)

I believe that “universal statements” made within the interfaith movement have direct bearing on engaging “exclusivists”.

I’d like to broaden the subject a bit to include conservative practitioners who might not be exclusivist. I do this because I think that we as a movement are excluding two related forms of conservative Abrahamic faiths. I have met conservative (but not exclusivist) Muslims and Jews in the interfaith movement who interpret their faith traditions, and their associated rules and prohibitions, very strictly.

Probably because of my weird insider/outsider status, I often find them confiding in me about things they find in the interfaith movement that excludes *them*.

For example... At the 2005 NAIN Connect in Las Vegas, we had a business meeting that was followed immediately in the same room by a Christian service. We didn’t even have to leave our seats. I was told later by a conservative Jew that he felt uncomfortable and wouldn’t have attended the service, but didn’t want to give offense by standing up and walking out.

At a meeting of the URI’s Global Council in 2003, the opening day of our meeting coincided with the Buddha’s birthday. In a spirit of sharing, the Buddhists present set up a shrine with an image of the Buddha inside, and just to the left of the entrance to our meeting room. We were all invited to light a stick of incense, place it in a holder before the small statue of the Buddha, and make or think a prayer as we entered.

A conservative Muslim and a conservative Jew who were present were very distressed by this.

Both felt that their understanding of their faith traditions prohibited burning incense before an idol, but as this had been set up to be part of our entering the room for our first session, it would be hard not to do so, and *not* have it stand out and possibly be taken as an insult to the Buddhists.

In both cases, the individuals were made *very* uncomfortable, but chose not to say anything at the time for fear of rocking the boat. In the first case, an individual was discomfited, but only spoke to me about it later. In the second instance, the affected individuals spoke up to the group, and it led to a useful discussion.

In all such cases, any affected individuals *should* speak up about being inadvertently excluded, but at the same time *we* should be more sensitive on our *own* initiative, especially when it would be so easy to do.

All we have to do to address this very real concern is to make sure that there is a break – in time or space, preferably both – between meetings that *everyone* is expected to attend, and religious services.

Conservative Muslims and Jews in interfaith are often made uncomfortable, but usually stay quiet about it and stay within the interfaith movement. Conservative, but not exclusivist Christians are often better able to accommodate themselves *within* the interfaith movement, since Christianity is sort of a “baseline” for our culture.

But conservative exclusivists opposed to interfaith – usually Christian, but sometimes Muslim – are more likely to stand outside and protest... loudly. Many of us were at the 1999 Parliament in Cape Town and saw the Christian and Muslim protestors lining the route of the opening procession of religions through the streets of Cape Town. What most of us *didn't* see – or even know anything about – was the convoy of over 100 vehicles carrying Christian protestors to Cape Town that was turned back by the South African military.

That same year, at the URI's Global Summit at Stanford University in California, we had a public interfaith service in the University “Chapel” (almost a cathedral, really) which was disrupted by a well-organized group of Christian protestors. In addition to the protestors with placards outside, they had managed to get several persons inside, in positions widely spaced around the chapel. When one protestor stood up and started witnessing, no sooner was that person surrounded and hustled out of the chapel when suddenly *another* protestor would stand up in *different* part of the chapel, keeping the security people on their toes. This went on for a few protestors. Many interfaith events have been disrupted by such protests, and many interfaith online discussion groups have had to shut down after being swamped with posts by exclusivist Christians.

I have an unusual take on engagement with the exclusivists opposed to interfaith work since I have been actively engaged in dialogue with them for 26 years. I started my interfaith work as the National Public Information Officer for the Covenant of the Goddess. When a conference titled: “Deception & Discernment: Exposing the Dangers of the Occult” was advertised in my home town of Berkeley, I thought I should attend and see what “the other side” was up to.

The conference was put on by the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, one of the leading Christian research organizations focusing on a Christian response to cults and the occult. I registered for the conference and got a name-tag with my name and “C. O. G.”, which I'm sure most attendees assumed meant “Church of God”. I stayed quiet and took notes through most of the conference until one of the last speakers, Jack Roper, made such ridiculous statements about Witchcraft & Neopaganism that I *had* to stand up during the Question & Answer period and say something.

I mean, this guy was *seriously* telling people that Witches worship unicorns! And that Dungeons & Dragons had been created by Witches as a recruitment tool, since it was “the best introduction to practicing real magic & casting real spells ever written”. (While most Witches *do* believe in and practice magic, we would all *really* love to see someone cast lightning from their fingertips by rolling some dice and consulting a convoluted table in a book.) Anyway, after I pointed out the many inaccuracies in his talk, Roper challenged me, asking why anyone should think I knew more about the subject than he.

“Well,” I said, “I *do* serve on the Board of Directors of the largest Wiccan religious organization on Earth.” At this point, all eyes turned towards me and the people sitting near me in the pews edged away. During the break that followed, most people avoided me, a few asked questions, but one came up and introduced himself in a friendly way. This was Brooks Alexander, one of the founders of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project. Unlike *every other* presentation at this conference, Brooks' talk had laid out the Biblical arguments against Witchcraft without ever misrepresenting what modern Witches actually believe or do.

This commitment to honesty on both our parts became the basis for further conversations and, eventually, a series of 10 four-hour dialogues between members of the Covenant of the Goddess and the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, comparing and contrasting Wicca and Christianity on topics like prayer, nature, women, ritual, evil, etc. At the end, we made a commercial video together. This was one of the most significant learning experiences in my Wiccan career. Brooks and I stayed in communication over the years. When he wrote a book on the modern Witchcraft movement for Evangelical Christians, I helped edit it. We have a program that we do together at various conferences called “Wiccan / Christian Dialogue: A 25-year Interfaith Friendship”.

Years after our dialogues in the 1980s, when I had become more deeply involved in interfaith work, I kept hearing non-Christians ask, “Why aren't the conservative American Christians here?”

The answer would invariably be: “Because you just can't talk to those people!”

I thought: “Well, I can talk to those people. Why don't I talk to them about this?”

I called up Brooks and suggested that we have some conversations about the pros & cons of interfaith, from a conservative, evangelical Christian perspective. At about the same time, I met Lee Penn<sup>3</sup>.

For those who don't know him, if you Google "United Religions Initiative" you are about as likely to turn up something by Lee about the evils of the URI as you are to turn up something by the URI itself. Lee is probably the leading opponent to the URI online.

I was working in Shambala Booksellers in Berkeley when someone bought some books on Freemasonry and paid with a check giving the name "Lee Penn". "Are you *the* Lee Penn, the author?", I asked.

"Yes", he said, somewhat suspiciously.

"Hi. My name's Don Frew. I'm on the Global Council of the URI. Would you like to get some coffee and have a chat?"

He was very surprised, he told me later, because I was the first person from the URI who had been at all friendly towards him since his first article critical of the organization. I genuinely wanted to hear what Lee had to say and to understand his point of view. While I wouldn't say that we have the friendship that Brooks and I have, we have a cordial working relationship.

When Lee wrote his magnum opus against interfaith and the URI – *False Dawn: The United Religions Initiative, Globalism, and the Quest for a One-World Religion* – he quoted me extensively.<sup>4</sup> Lee showed me everything he was planning to cite and gave me the opportunity to make corrections. On the one statement where we had significant disagreement as to what I had said, he included my objection in a footnote. Lee treated me fairly and honestly.

Talking to Brooks, Lee, and the people I met through them, I learned a *lot* about *their* perception of *us* in the interfaith movement.

Conservative practitioners of many faiths see the interfaith movement as creating a single, new, syncretic religion and *from their point of view* we are doing *exactly that* when we emphasize our similarities and ignore or downplay our differences.

By and large, the conservative Christians opposed to interfaith believe in a coming End Times that will include the creation by the Anti-Christ of a single, world-government and a single, world-spanning religion. Many of them see the United Nations as a significant step in the process of the creation of a one-world government. It should come as no surprise that many of them also see our interfaith efforts as steps towards the creation of a single world-religion. Unfortunately, on those few occasions when members of the two groups have been in communication – usually in internet forums – the "discussion" has almost always been along the lines of:

"You're creating a single religion!"

"No, we aren't!"

"Yes you are!"

"No, we aren't!"

... and so on.

Such limited exchanges haven't addressed the real issues between us.

\*\*\* What we need to understand is that the liberal social agenda that most folks involved in interfaith share, combined with the "universal statements" that unfortunately are so common in our rhetoric and our promotional literature *give the appearance* of being the tenets of the single world-religion of which the conservatives are so afraid. \*\*\*

We in the interfaith movement tend to agree that:

- the genders should be treated equally and have equal rights.
- that we and the natural world are interconnected and that we have responsibility for caring for the world.

<sup>3</sup> BTW, Lee self-identifies as an Eastern Catholic, not an Evangelical Protestant.

<sup>4</sup> Many interfaith folks are surprised to learn that *False Dawn* was published by Sophia Perennis, the main publisher of books on the Perennial Philosophy. The connection between the Perennial Philosophy and opposition to interfaith work is spelled out in the review of *False Dawn* on the Sophia Perennis website at: <http://www.sophiaperennis.com/discussion-forums/sophia-perennis-book-reviews/false-dawn-the-united-religions-initiative-globalism-and-the-quest-for-a-one-world-religion/>

-- that all religions should have equal legal standing and that the laws of society should be independent of the rules of any particular faith tradition.

Many conservative exclusionists hear these statements, and the “universal statements” I addressed before, and disagree with almost *all* of them.<sup>5</sup> Few, if any, of these societal views and statements of belief agree with *their* interpretations of their own faith traditions, so these are seen as *doctrinal* statements representing the beliefs of the feared, new, one-world religion.

From their point of view, they’re correct.

The waters of misunderstood communication can be further muddied by the statements of those prominent in the interfaith movement. For example, one of the 21 Principles in the URI Charter states that: “Members of the URI shall not be coerced to participate in any ritual or be proselytized.”

Most of the people I know within the interfaith movement understand this to mean that those who *do* proselytize in their faith traditions must leave their proselytizing at the door when we come to a URI event, i.e. that no one will be proselytized to at a URI event without their consent. However, when Bishop William Swing, the primary founder of the URI, speaks in his role as an Episcopal Bishop about what he sees as the evils of proselytizing in general,<sup>6</sup> conservatives mistakenly apply the Bishop’s personal views to the position of the URI and end up believing that the URI condemns proselytizing in *all* circumstances, *all* over the world. When I explained this to Lee Penn, he was genuinely surprised.

“You mean,” he said, “I could hold a Christian prayer service at a URI meeting?”

“Of course,” I said. “We’d schedule a room, I’d make the announcement, and whoever wished to attend could do so.”

There have been a *lot* of misunderstandings based solely on the language we use, language we could easily change, or at least be clearer about.

I think that this process of dialogue with conservative Christians opposed to interfaith was made *much* easier by my not being a Christian. The conversation between progressive Christians *within* the interfaith movement and conservative Christians *opposed* to it is *still* felt to be an intra-familial one and can get very heated. Strangely enough, in all of the conversations I have observed or overheard between members of these two groups of Christians, it has *without exception* been the progressive, interfaith Christians who have been the first to raise their voices, become insulting, and/or attempt to convince the other person that their understanding of their faith tradition was flat out wrong (something the interfaith Christians would *never* do with practitioners of other religions). This has been a *real* surprise to me.

The fact is that the conservative Christians opposed to interfaith will *never* join our organizations, but I firmly believe that there *is* room in the interfaith movement for many others – somewhat *less* conservative – who don’t share many of our commonly held views, even for those who believe that their faith is the one, true faith, as long as they are polite and abide by our rules of conduct. Dialogue *is* possible, and even productive, and can lead to friendships and cooperation.

When the US was gearing up for the Iraq War, Lee Penn came to me and asked if I thought that Bishop Swing would join him in a letter opposing such a war. Regardless of their differences on other issues, Lee told me, they were united in their opposition to the war and having two people so opposed to each other come together might draw attention to a letter. I floated the idea with some folks at the URI office, but no one there wanted anything to do with Lee Penn and it went no further.

When his book *False Dawn* came out, we were both interviewed on Fox News and host Alan Colmes was stunned that we were so cordial with each other, in many ways making the case *for* interfaith dialogue right there. Lee has moved on to other areas of interest,<sup>7</sup> but we stay in touch.

### Engaging Atheists

Yesterday, after bringing up engaging “exclusivists”, Jason went on to ask about engaging secularists and atheists. Two of my oldest friends are atheists (not to mention two members of my coven – yes, you *can* be an atheist and a

<sup>5</sup> Although, to be fair, the disagreements with the three points I made above are not usually in the form of direct opposition, but in significant disagreement as to how these positions are then implemented in social policy.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop William Swing, *The Coming United Religions*, United Religions Initiative and CoNexus Press, 1998, ISBN 0-9637897-5-9; p. 31

<sup>7</sup> He does have an updated section from his book dealing with the URI online at [http://www.leepenn.org/B16\\_encyclical\\_v74\\_part2.doc](http://www.leepenn.org/B16_encyclical_v74_part2.doc)

Witch), so I guess I have been in dialog with atheists for about 35 years. In a more official capacity, I *have* spoken at the local atheist organization in the SF Bay Area and written a book with nationally prominent Skeptics, so there's been some discussion there as well.

I honestly don't think there is a lot of hope for the interfaith movement to engage the so-called neo-atheists (as represented by Dawkins, Harris, and their ilk) in any productive way.

When I was Public Information Officer for the Covenant of the Goddess, I used to say that I would rather that someone fear me than think I'm silly. If someone fears me, they'll pay attention to what I have to say and I can convince them that there's nothing to fear. But if he or she just thinks I'm silly, I'll just be ignored. *I* fear that the neo-Atheists just think we're silly. So much for that.

However, last night I was speaking with Josh, one of NAIN's Young Adult scholarship recipients, about some new atheist / secular / naturalist / religion hybrids that are coming into being with which there might be hope for dialog. This is something that will probably be taken up by the youth.

### Conclusion

While sharing similarities allows us to find the common ground to build relationships and then friendships, we won't achieve peace until we *use* that safe space to share and accept our differences... to truly accept *all* faiths.

To do that we need to be more careful about the way we present ourselves, the language we use, and even the way we structure our meetings. We need to be open to engaging religions on their *own* terms, without preconceptions of what religion is or what we "all" supposedly share, avoiding syncretism and respecting the integrity and uniqueness of *each* faith tradition and the boundaries that can make dialog and cooperation difficult, but not impossible.

Thank you.

### Presenter Bio

Elder Don Frew is a National Interfaith Representative for the Covenant of the Goddess ([www.cog.org](http://www.cog.org)). He has represented the Craft in interfaith work for over 25 years and serves on the Board of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio, on the Global Council of the United Religions Initiative, and with the Assembly of the Parliament of the World's Religions. He is the founder & Director of the Lost & Endangered Religions Project and co-founder of the Adocentyn Research Library in Berkeley CA. He may be reached at: [DHF3@aol.com](mailto:DHF3@aol.com) or (510) 524-2078