

# Interfaith Dialogue in the Post-9/11 World



Photograph by Barry Fitzgerald

Left to right: Rabbi Kenneth Cohen, Reverend Clark Lobenstine, and Imam Yahya Hendi.

*To mark the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we asked three clergymen from various religious communities to discuss the interfaith dialogue following 9/11.*

*Imam Yahya Hendi is the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.; imam of the Islamic Society of Frederick, Maryland; and the Muslim chaplain at the National Naval Medical Center. Rabbi Kenneth L. Cohen has been American University's campus rabbi and executive director of the campus Hillel since 2001. The Reverend Clark Lobenstine, a Presbyterian minister, is the executive director of the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (D.C.) and secretary of the city's Interfaith Council.*

*In the tragic aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, all three of these clergymen reached out to other religions and religious leaders to bring their particular communities together.*

*The discussion moderator was George Clack, director of the publications office in the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs.*

**George Clack:** What was the response from members of your congregations after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and how did you as clergymen address their concerns?

**Imam Yahya Hendi:** The first thing we did at Georgetown University was to ask the entire community to come together for an interfaith prayer. Almost 600 students and faculty members attended the largest interfaith service I have ever seen.

And the prayer service was made up of all faith communities: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and others who prayed with one voice for America and for peace around the world.

**Rabbi Kenneth Cohen:** Within a few hours of the attacks, all of the clergy and campus ministers at American University were on the steps of the Kay Spiritual Life Center with hundreds of university students, faculty, and staff. I told those assembled that the university community must not take their anger out on the Muslim community because they are no more guilty of this than anyone else on the campus. It was a very important message that was universally echoed at American University.

The first few days after 9/11 some Muslims were not coming to campus. Student leaders and I phoned up Muslims that we knew and said, "Please come back to campus. Don't be afraid. If you are afraid, we will escort

you personally to classes.” September 11 brought us much closer together.



*And when we get to know one another, we see what it is we have in common with one another.*

if she was afraid she could stay at their home or they would bring her food and protect her. In Hagerstown, Maryland, the Christian community provided guards to protect the mosque there.

There is an awful lot of bad religion in the world, and the cure to that is good religion. We have seen bad religion and good religion within all faith communities. When our religions attempt to make God small like us rather than inspire us to become big like God, they are no better than tribes. Religions at their best can inspire to that which is most noble within us.

**Reverend Clark Lobenstine:** Since 1978, the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington has been working with the Islamic, Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic



A Muslim and a Jewish teen talk at the Palisades Emergency Residence Corporation, a 40-bed shelter for single homeless people in Union City, New Jersey, set up by a group of some 20 Muslim and Jewish young women.

communities. So on that day we issued a statement of sympathy for all of the victims of the attacks. We also wrote that the actions of a few who would abuse their religion to justify violence must not be used to condemn a whole faith community, and that we must bring those responsible to justice.

In the six months following 9/11, we placed 107 speakers, about two-thirds of whom were Muslims, in 36 different congregations, schools, and community groups for events and discussions on the September 11 terrorist attacks.

**Imam Hendi:** Immediately after the attacks on our nation on September 11, I told my wife not to leave home. But she told me how our Christian neighbor told her that

**Mr. Clack:** Why do you think interfaith dialogue is important?

**Imam Hendi:** I like to call what we do interreligious dialogue. Faith has manifested itself in different religious forms but our three religions, for example, believe in the existence of a creator. Even though our three religions believe that God has been revealed in different ways, each religion believes in the same morals and ethics even though the details are different.

Interreligious dialogue is about bringing different religious communities together to learn how to celebrate differences, not to become one. I do not want Jews and Christians and Muslims to become of one faith. That cannot happen, and will never happen. The Quran says if God had willed, he would have made you all of one nation. In other words, God wants us to be different. The challenge for us is to maintain differences in a humane, civilized way.

**Rabbi Cohen:** I think it is important to realize that religions don't "dialogue;" people "dialogue." And when we get to know one another, we see what it is we have in common with one another.

Religion gives us the spiritual tools to express ourselves. We enhance our own understanding of our own religion when we have the opportunity to understand how others in different religious communities encounter the divine.

**Rev. Lobenstine:** The InterFaith Conference brings people of different religions together with profound respect for each religious tradition.

In the process of sharing with one another, we do not leave our faith traditions but deepen our own faith traditions and understanding of God.

A very important part of interreligious work, both collaboration for social justice as well as deepening understanding, is creating opportunities for actually getting to know people of other faiths; and once we know that person, we have more interest in learning about the similarities and the differences in our faiths.

Diana Eck, director of the Center for World Religious

Pluralism at Harvard University, once said that the world is most deeply divided not between religions but between those in each religious



*We should encourage people to cross boundaries, to get out of their own houses and their congregations and into others' houses and congregations.*

tradition who hold their faith in openhanded and generous ways, and those who hold their faith in close-fisted and narrow ways. It is a difference between those who feel their faith to be secure only by building walls, and those for whom their faith is secure by virtue of deep roots.

**Rabbi Cohen:** Our rabbis in the Talmud ask the question, "Who is brave, who is valiant?" The answer is one who makes an enemy into a friend. We need enormous good will. We don't need to emphasize those aspects of our faith traditions which are militant and warlike. We need to put our effort into dialogue and understanding.

**Imam Hendi:** I talk about the need for our religious communities to master the art of listening more than the art of talking. Often we feel good about presenting ourselves and our point of view. Maybe we need to sit back and listen to others' stories and feel them as our own.

**Rev. Lobenstine:** We should try to create opportunities where people feel welcome in our different congregations. We should encourage people to cross boundaries, to get out of their own houses and their congregations and into others' houses and congregations.

**Rabbi Cohen:** Nothing unites people more than the existence of a common enemy, and we do have a common enemy. The common enemy is hatred and intolerance. If we're mindful of that, we will be brought together because we have a common purpose.

**Imam Hendi:** Once I was invited to deliver a homily in a Christian service on Sunday. And my homily was about the story of Jonah and the whale. At the end of my homily I asked the audience where they thought the story I was reading came from. They said, "It's from the Bible." But I told the class, "No, this is the Quran." And people were

surprised that the Quran had the very same story of Jonah as the Bible did and that an imam would speak about the story of Jonah very much like a minister

would do in a church. So this is where we discover our commonalities.

**Rabbi Cohen:** I think something we also have in common is human nature. Angry people, no matter what their religion, will have an angry god, and loving people will have a loving god. It's important for us to transcend the various denominations because if you are a hateful person, if you are an angry person, you will be able to find texts within your respective religious traditions which justify hate and justify anger. But if you're predisposed to be a

welcoming, open, loving individual, surely you'll find texts within your religious tradition which can justify that as well. The texts are there, either the hateful ones or the loving ones. Which one will you choose?

**Mr. Clack:** You've said that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share similar faith traditions. What about religions that are outside of that particular tradition like Hinduism or Buddhism? Is there a place for other religions in what you were saying?



Tibetan monks lead a prayer ceremony in Union Square in New York City on September 13, 2001.

**Imam Hendi:** Without a doubt. The essence of Buddhism is about how one can bring about the best of one's self and sacrifice for the whole. The Hindu faith seeks to nurture the true sense of the self to bring about the best for the whole. These are also parts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

**Rev. Lobenstine:** And the Quran says that there are prophets of which you know not.

**Imam Hendi:** Absolutely. The Holy Quran in Chapter 49, Verse 13, one of my favorite verses in the Quran, says that God saves all humankind, that God created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you equal, and made you into nations and tribes that you come to know each other, not that you may despise each other.

**Rabbi Cohen:** I believe that we are all climbing the same mountain. We may have started in different places on the mountain or have a different view of the summit, but it is necessary to be mindful of the fact that we are all headed towards the very same summit.

There has been a good deal of discussion after 9/11 about religious fanaticism. I would define fanaticism as any manifestation of any religion which lessens human dignity and the worth of the individual. Good religion enhances human dignity.

**Mr. Clack:** The 9/11 terrorist attacks were tragic for the victims and their families. Yet many religious traditions emphasize the possibility of good arising from evil. Do you see a sense in which some good has come out of these attacks?

**Rev. Lobenstine:** Much of the world lives in a situation where there is violence and where daily life is threatened. 9/11 was a terrible, terrible thing, but it gave Americans the opportunity to understand suffering in a very painful and poignant way. Our security was shattered, and while it was a terrible thing, it gave us the opportunity to regroup and to reflect on the fact that freedom is not free and that security must not be taken for granted.

So we cope with the trauma, we cope with the threat, but at the same time we need to affirm tolerance for the various American communities: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and non-believers. We're all part of the same family.

**Rabbi Cohen:** I think the values that we have, the open-hearted and open-handed approach to our religion versus the tight-fisted and building-walls version of our religion, gives us the opportunity to work with each other and to understand that God calls us to build a community, a nation of justice. Healing of the world is a common challenge for all of our faith communities, and 9/11 magnified that.

**Imam Hendi:** Americans after September 11 learned that we should not take our freedoms for granted; we should not take our security for granted; and that we need to be unified. Before September 11 there was some dialogue between Jews and Muslims, but it was very official. I have seen more Jewish-Muslim dialogue after September 11

*Our ability to bring about a peaceful world depends on how we can work together side by side as partners.*



than I have ever seen before.

Last year, 100 rabbis and imams met in Europe for the second time in history. The first one was the year before that, talking about how rabbis and

imams can become a beacon of hope for the Arabs and the Israelis to create a peaceful reality for both sides. So September 11 was a very tragic, sad event, but it brought Jews and Muslims together. And I do believe we will see more of that in the years ahead.

**Mr. Clack:** What do you see as the lessons of 9/11?

**Rabbi Cohen:** All of us who are religious believers, and those of us who embrace various secular ideologies are faced every day with choices. We can make humanistic choices or we can make choices which are harsh and which are severe. I think a guiding principle we should all embrace is to always err on the side of being humanistic. We should always be mindful of the fact that humanity was created in God's image, and we should be mindful of the Golden Rule. What we need now more than anything is enormous good will. That is the clarion call of this hour.

**Rev. Lobenstine:** Amen. I would share a part of a quote by Diana Eck: "As far as we know, one world is all we have to live in. We do not have one to experiment in, divide, despoil, destroy, and then another to learn to live in." So the challenge we have as people of faith and as humans of good will is to find ways to make sure that we are engendering life and protecting life and creating justice in the one world that we all have.

**Imam Hendi:** People talk about tearing down walls of separation between them. I don't want to tear down walls but rather turn those walls into tables that bring us all together where we can enjoy the blessing of God on this Earth. Our ability to bring about a peaceful world depends on how we can work together side by side as partners. Terrorism, extremism, and violence in the name of religion threaten all of us. ■

---

*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*