

## Peace Among Religions

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### READING – the Peace Seeds

<https://thecompassionategardener.wordpress.com/2014/11/28/the-peace-seeds-12-interfaith-prayers-for-peace/>

### TALK

Hans Kung, a contemporary Swiss theologian, now in his early nineties, put forth a very simple and powerful theory about the possibility of peace among religions.

“No peace among the nations  
without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions  
without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions  
without investigation of the foundation of the religions.”

Since the very first Parliament of World Religions in 1983, peace has been the essential value of interfaith dialogue. The hope of peace was also what motivated world religious leaders to gather in Assisi in 1986 and share the 12 Interfaith Prayers for Peace known as the Peace Seeds, which point to the common foundations of all world religions in love, compassion, and justice.

So long as religions are in conflict and unfriendly competition, so long as religions are harboring enemy images of their neighbor religions, how are we going to achieve peace among the nations? Without peace, how will we effectively address the injustices in our societies, like poverty, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression? How will we effectively reverse the dangerous progress of species extinction and climate change? How can we do what needs to be done when we are squandering our scarce resources on nuclear weapons and other horrific devices of destruction, and training whole armies of people to be ready to kill each other at a moment's notice?

Some of you know that I come from an interfaith family, with a Jewish Father and a Catholic Mother. I was raised with both religions, and I'm grateful for how both have enriched my life. But having two faiths has also been a very difficult experience. When I was only about a year old, my Father was cut off from his family for marrying a non-Jew and not raising his kids Jewish. His family sat Shiva for him, pretending he had died, and when my grandfather passed away, my father was not even listed on the obituary. He was totally cut off and so was I and the rest of my family. On the other hand, as

a young boy being raised primarily Catholic, I also found it very disturbing to learn in Church that because my father was not Catholic and did not take communion, that he was therefore going to hell when he died. In many ways my Catholic faith was a comfort and inspiration, but when I said my prayers at night, for many years, I often felt deeply disturbed by the idea that my father and the other Jewish people I knew would be damned to hell. It took me many years of prayer and discernment and study to finally come to peace with knowing that no matter what the Church taught, this made no sense for a loving God and simply could not be true.

So for me interfaith dialogue and peacemaking is very personal and it is at the heart of my calling.

As our Rwandan friend Hyppolite puts it, the goal of peacemaking is to stop the intergenerational transmission of hate. As much as religions and spiritual traditions carry with them treasures of spirituality and ethics and culture, they also often carry an element of hatred, a superiority complex, ways of favoring the in-group and looking down on the out-group. And this is not some obscure problem with religions—the fact that religions sow hatred and division is the single biggest reason that young people and people of all ages are choosing not to participate in religion at all.

Since the very beginning of my calling into the ministry, I have been intent on filtering the hate and exclusion out of Christianity, and getting back to its essential foundations as a way of life based on the principles of faith, forgiveness, peace, love, and justice. When I heard the call to ministry in college I was reading a book by the great Russian novelist turned mystic, Leo Tolstoy, called *What I Believe*, in which he deconstructs layers of Christian dogma to get down to Jesus' original message of the transformative power of love and non-violent resistance to evil. Tolstoy died in 1910 and just before he did, he exchanged letters with Gandhi. Gandhi read Tolstoy's work on religion before he began his career as an activist and Gandhi's experimental concepts of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (truth or soul force) were largely based on Tolstoy's interpretation of the non-violent resistance of Jesus. Though Gandhi was a life-long Hindu, he called Jesus the exemplar par excellence of *ahimsa*. Howard Thurman was the first of many American civil rights leaders, including MLK, who visited Gandhi and brought back the doctrines of soul-force and non-violent resistance to evil into the American movements for justice. And as many of you know, Howard Thurman started the first interracial and interfaith church in America in the 1950s, which has served as my primary model since I began my ministry at Common Street in 2012.

At the very beginning of Common Street, back when we were called Common Street Community Church...we had a major controversy when I objected to the request of many members to put up a big cross in the sanctuary. I had been preaching a vision of an inclusive, interfaith church...and a big cross didn't feel to me like the right symbol to represent this vision. My problem with the cross was that it would scare away Jews, Muslims, and people who aren't religious, while only being a positive symbol for Christians—and I wanted Common Street to be inclusive and welcoming of all people. So instead, I suggested that we use an image of a dove as a central symbol in the sanctuary, because the dove is not only mentioned in biblical stories like Noah's Ark and the Baptism of Jesus, it is also a universally recognizable symbol of peace.

As a compromise, I suggested we make a movable cross that would be a mosaic of broken glass from a clean up of Coolidge Hill...and which a local Jewish artist Carol Krentzman offered to work on. However, this compromise wasn't accepted.

A coalition of those who wanted the big cross in the sanctuary began to brand me as an imposter...if I didn't want a big cross I couldn't be a true Christian minister. And I want to say that I understood why people were so upset because they were not expecting me to be a Baptist minister in the tradition of MLK and Howard Thurman. But in fact, as such, I was being true to my understanding of Jesus' life and message as well as the Jewish part of myself, and I still believe today that Jesus was a Jewish peacemaker and would not be so enthusiastic about a symbol that can make a sacred space feel exclusive for Jews, Muslims, and other persons who aren't Christian. About 15 out of only 40 or so members left Common Street after the cross and dove controversy. But today in our sanctuary there is a dove with the word PEACE written across it perched in a tree of life. And that is a symbol that lets everyone know that our sanctuary is a place where all people are welcome.

It's been said that our country and every country needs a Department of Peace. Essentially, the Spiritual Center has attempted to play that kind of role in religious and spiritual life.

The Lord's Prayer Experience

Abrahamic Trialogue

Dialogues on Islamophobia

Universal Shabbat

Communion Reimagined to Include Apples and Honey, a Jewish-inspired element

Pagan and Indigenous Celebrations

Celebrations of Ramadan, Diwali, etc.

We are always open to integrating the many spiritual paths of our members and our neighbors.

Again on a personal note, my PhD work was on how dialogue between Christianity and Islam can help to construct a common environmental ethic for the two faiths. And my continuing research is on new interpretations of the Bible and Qur'an that can be used to construct theological narratives that transform the relationship between these two faiths into one primarily of cooperation and trust. I know that my childhood experience draws me into this aspect of theology, in a quest for healing.

Whatever we are doing here to make our spiritual life more inclusive, when we change the lyrics of songs or adjust rituals, when we broaden our calendar of holidays to include everyone, when we acknowledge and validate each other's deep feelings and ways of making meaning, when we pause to engage in dialogue and share our different perspectives, what we are doing is we are filtering out the

hate which has been passed down in our religions. We're also dealing with the trauma of religious exclusion. We are being peacemakers in the sense that Hyppolite means when he talks about stopping the intergenerational transmission of hate. We are prioritizing love, peace, justice and truth over religious traditions that unfortunately carry hatred and sow division. And in doing so, we are playing our small part in the greater movement for peace among nations and peace on earth.