



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Working Together”

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A conversation on September 3, 2017, with

Mr. Edward Ahmed Mitchell, Council of American-Islamic Relations

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

O humankind, We [God] have created you male and female and made you into communities and tribes so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest amongst you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-Knowing and All-Aware. Qur'an 49:13

*I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church.
For you and I are sons of one religion, and it is of the spirit. Kahlil Gibran*

My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together. Desmond Tutu

Each of us has a unique part to play in the healing of the world. Marianne Williamson

Conversation Questions from Rev. Eskildsen: *(Mr. Mitchell's responses were not scripted and therefore not included in this document)*

Thank you again, Mr. Mitchell, for joining our congregation this Labor Day weekend to share some of your views about Islam and being a Muslim in America. For our conversation, I'll first share some thoughts which will prompt a question for you.

1. I am committed to being a Unitarian Universalist (UU) because, for me, it offers hope for our future. I believe Unitarian Universalism, when we're at our best, exemplifies how people can live together as one community despite our religious differences. I also love that my tradition allows me to form my own beliefs in accord with my conscience. I believe what I must, not what I am told. Since we cannot know if or what one ultimate truth may be, we try to live the best way we can, furthering love not hate.

What do you love most about your faith? What inspires you, keeps you committed and faithful in a time when many drift away from their faith?

2. Last Sunday I called myself an equal opportunity offender because we are so different in our beliefs, I'm sure to make one group or another unhappy with what I say. Your mosques are similar in that there is often only one located in a particular place because both our numbers are relatively small in comparison to the larger Christian population.

How difficult is it to speak as one or manage the differences within your own community? I imagine your members include conservative to moderate Muslims as well as people from many nations. What difficulties does that create?

3. Professor Amer [*Imam Adel Amer of the Al-Huda Islamic Center in Athens*] and I have had some conversations around the idea of pluralism and whether that leads to relativism. Diana Eck, a Professor of Religious Studies at Harvard University, notes that “Pluralism is the process of creating a society through critical and self-critical encounter with one another, acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences” as well as a commitment to constructive dialogue such as we’re having this morning.

In your view, does pluralism encourage relativism, which makes one religion have equal standing with another? Does being in relationship with other religious traditions lessen the truth of Islam?

4. During Ramadan a few months ago, I wore a headscarf when I attended the Al-Huda mosque’s *iftar*, which celebrates the breaking of the fast after sundown. Wearing the scarf while driving to the mosque made me feel quite vulnerable. I wanted to shout, “I’m not a Muslim! Don’t be afraid of me.” I was ashamed of that feeling and I recognized how privileged I am in feeling safe. In March you were quoted in a New York Times article of recommending security cameras, locked doors, and armed guards at mosques.

Does this reflect real dangers and how afraid your community feels? Do you feel terrorized by non-Muslims? What can people of good will do to support you and reduce the fear we each may have of each other?

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What encourages you, or calls you, to reach across differences? When you reach out in some way, how does that change you or affect your heart, mind, or spirit?
2. Share or reflect on any concerns you may have about violence done in the name of Islam and violence done against Muslims in America. Does your concern limit your activities or motivate you to act in some way? If so, how?
3. How might you and/or UUFA create or improve relations and reduce discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims in Athens? How would this benefit you and the larger community?