

**From
Inner
Harmony**

to

**Interfaith
Harmony**

Benefiting Our Community
in the Post-Pandemic Era



Date: Thursday, February 2, 2023

Date: Thursday, February 2, 2023

Time: 10:00 am to 2:30 pm (Central Time Zone, USA)

Venue: The Lyceum of First Lutheran Church and Zoom Platform



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report could not have been done without those people who generously shared their talents and time to design and develop the report cover and the full content. These key individuals included:

- • Ven. Miaolung Shih, Rev. Richard Rhoades, and Dr. Huey-Ming Tzeng, production oversight
- • Mr. Yu-Cheng Ding, image design
- • Ms. Sheng-Yi Hsiao, poster design
- • Ms. Xinying (Tracy) Liu and Dr. Wei-Chen “Miso” Lee, content development
- • Ms. Linda S. Orgain, content editing

The members of the planning committee would also like to thank the support received from local organizations and sponsors, including (alphabetically):

- • First Lutheran Church of Galveston
- • Fo Guang Shan (International Buddhist Progress Society-Dallas)
- • Galveston Ministerial Alliance
- • The Galveston Rotary Foundation of the Rotary Club of Galveston, Texas



From Inner Harmony to Interpersonal Harmony:

Benefiting Our Community in the Post-Pandemic Era



Date

Thursday, February 2, 2023

Time

10:00 am to 2:30 pm (Central Time Zone, Texas, USA)

Venue

The Lyceum of First Lutheran Church,
2415 Winnie St., Galveston, TX, USA;
Zoom Platform



Eventbrite Link:
<https://tinyurl.com/bdfmpnhr>



From Inner Harmony
To Interfaith Harmony

01
AGENDA

2023 UNITED NATIONS WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK *From Inner Peace to Interpersonal Harmony: Benefiting Our Community in the Post-Pandemic Era*

Aim: To foster a better understanding of interfaith values and practices, build friendships among people from diverse religious backgrounds, and promote interfaith harmony in the community.

Date: Thursday, February 2, 2023

Time: 10:00 am to 2:30 pm (Central Time Zone, Texas, the US)

Venue: The Lyceum of First Lutheran Church (2415 Winnie St., Galveston, TX, USA), and Zoom Platform

Sponsors: First Lutheran Church of Galveston, The Galveston Rotary Foundation, Inc., Galveston Ministerial Alliance, and International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS)-Dallas

Agenda

9:30 am–10:00 am: Registration

10:00 am–10:15 am: Opening---*Reverend* Richard Rhoades, Pastor, First Lutheran Church, Galveston

10:15 am–10:45 am: Keynote---*Father* Thomas Colyandro, Orthodox Priest

10:45 am–11:00 am: Coffee break with light refreshments and mingle

11:00 am–12:15 pm: Panel 1---Interfaith discussion: From seeking inner peace, facilitating interpersonal and family harmonies, to reaching community harmony in the post-pandemic era

- • Moderator: *Reverend* Richard Rhoades, Pastor, First Lutheran Church, Galveston
- • Judaism: *Rabbi* Peter Kessler, Congregation B'nai Israel, Galveston
- • Lutheran: *Reverend* Michael Rinehart, Bishop of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, Houston
- • Hinduism (online): Mr. Rajnish Kashyap, General Secretary, Hindu Council UK
- • Buddhism(online): *Venerable* Dr. Miaolung Shih, Dharma Teacher, IBPS Dallas (Fo Guang

Shan Buddhist Order); Instructor, the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston

- • Islam: *Imam* Dr. Muhammad N. Haq, American Society for Islamic Awareness; Adjunct Professor of Religious Studies, University of Houston

12:15 pm–1:00 pm: Working lunch (provided)

1:00 pm–2:00 pm: Panel 2---The success and challenges of achieving interfaith harmony: How do we live harmoniously with different religions in the post-pandemic era

- • Moderator: *Father* Thomas Colyandro, Orthodox Priest
- • Christianity: *Reverend* Dr. Duane Larson, retired president of Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa; Lecturer of Religious Studies, University of Houston
- • Buddhism (video): Professor Dr. Bee Scherer, Chair and Full Professor, Buddhist Studies Department, Rector of the Buddhist Seminary, Free University (Vrije Universiteit) Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- • Confucianism and Buddhism (online): Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway, Levenson Chair and Associate Professor, Department of History, Florida Atlantic University

2:00 pm–2:30 pm: Closing---*Reverend* Richard Rhoades and *Venerable* Dr. Miaolung Shih



From Inner Harmony
To Interfaith Harmony

02

KEYNOTE SPEECH



Keynote Speech by Fr. Thomas Colyandro

Orthodox Priest

Biography

Fr. Thomas Colyandro is an Orthodox priest, confessor, retreat master, and writer who has provided spiritual guidance and conducted seminars. He has spoken at more than 160 parishes and monasteries, written and/or edited books and articles in theology and spirituality, and has been interviewed frequently regarding these same subjects. Fr. Thomas' doctoral research centered on his original concept of an "uncreated silence," which exists by the presence of God in prayer and is fostered by spiritual relationships. He was the assistant director of the Center for Faith & Culture at the University of St. Thomas and has taught graduate courses in theology, eschatology, ecclesiastical history, comparative religion, and leadership in adult faith formation at multiple universities.

Introduction

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge Reverend Richard Rhoades, who is my dear friend and colleague. You are truly one of the great facilitators of our time and place. You are a loving, generous, peaceful person whom I believe embodies this topic. To all the people who worked tirelessly to put together this event and to those who have helped around the world to make sure that religious dialogue, and more specifically, that a dialogue of prayer remains alive in our day, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. To everyone here present, to those who have joined us online, and to those who see these recordings in the future, I want to offer my own love and peace which is a result of a constant calling to prayer.

Let us first together take a deep breath.

My dear brothers and sisters, I prayed, thought, studied, considered, and wrote about what I wanted to communicate today. This topic is a beautiful one, but it is also a fluid one, which reflects its reality on the ground. We here in this room, and I would venture to say, in all the rooms where these gatherings are taking place around the world, as religious AND spiritual people we want three things: to be at some level of peace within ourselves, to have loving and supportive relationships in our families and faith groups, and to be able to create mutually beneficial associations with people beyond the borders of our daily routines. But this is exactly what makes a topic like this so hard to capture. To talk properly about it, we must understand: what is our interior? How do we relate outwardly? What is peace? What is prayer? What do each of our own religions say about such things? What is dialogue? And how do we do it in a time and a place fraught with such discontentment and chaos?

The Five Parts of a Person

To get to the bottom of the question at hand, we must start with the premise that the human person is constituted of five things. We are physical. We are mental. We are emotional. We are relational. And we are spiritual. Derivations of this framework can be found in differing forms of theological, philosophical, psychological, and sociological systems. In many religious traditions, this is a way we can conceptualize the person, compartmentalize the various aspects of personhood, and then we can conceive a fuller understanding of the person in relation to other persons. In other words, it is through these five lenses that we can create an understanding of the total self. But not some ideal person. A specific person. You and you and me. In the Eastern Christian tradition, these five aspects are dynamically linked. But we believe that the spiritual aspect of the self is that which undergirds all the other aspects, and, in the end, supersedes them.

And let me be clear. This is not to say that the spiritual self, when informed by religion and theology, should in any way destroy these other aspects. Instead, it is the spiritual aspect of the person that integrates and enlivens the self. It is that which brings each of us into an encounter with the more that is and was and ever will be. The other side of this story, though, is that if we ignore or maltreat the inner person, we are left only with a seriously misanthropic, even malevolent, solipsism. I think it is fair to say that, today, a persistent narcissism permeates every society around the world.

As you can already hear, these opposing realities are both the cause and the effect of the interior life. And I will contend that the reflection of the inner person to him or herself and to others is in direct correlation to its state of silence and stillness or cacophony and chaos. Thus, we can say that by properly deepening and strengthening our interior, we will unlock the proof that within our unique self, created by God, can be found both the key to a personal and eternal relationship with the Divine, and a more peaceful relationship with those closest to us, which will, by extension, dramatically slow the speed and force of the seemingly infinite loop of recurring human structures, people, and behaviors that destroy and degrade ALL human life, ultimately reducing each and every one of us to nothingness.

So, let's unpack the premise. I will do this by utilizing my knowledge, prayer, and long practice of spiritual guidance and ministry to express three main ideas. First, I will provide you with an explanation and an approach to inner peace. Second, I will provide you a look into how the relationship between inner peace and familial or communal peace can be broken. Third, I will provide you with a perspective on interfaith and ecumenical dialogue within this year's stated goal of "interfaith harmony."

Inner Peace

In this first section, I will examine this idea of inner peace. Here, it is important to understand that "inner peace" cannot merely be a state of satisfaction, or worse, gratification. If we are to help others toward a greater understanding of the self in order to find peace within and without, then we have to understand that each human actually has an interior that is distinct, though in relation to, their exterior qualities. Then, we must understand that there are constituent parts of that interior.

As an example, in our tradition, we speak of a nous, N-O-U-S, a Greek word, which essentially means in English, intellect. But this does not simply mean 'thinking' or 'reasoning,' or 'learning.' The nous is that highest faculty of a human person, who, within it, can know God "or even the inner essences or principles of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception.

Unlike ...reason, from which it must be carefully distinguished, the intellect does not function by formulating abstract concepts and then arguing on this basis to a conclusion reached through deductive reasoning, but it understands divine truth by means of immediate experience, intuition or 'simple cognition' (the term used by St. Isaac the Syrian). The intellect dwells in the 'depths of the soul'; it constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart... the intellect is the organ of contemplation."¹

I

ntimately connected with the nous is the kardia, K-A-R-D-I-A, a Greek word, which essentially means in English, heart. But this does not simply mean the physical organ. The kardia is the spiritual center of a person's being. The person "as made in the image of God, his (or her) deepest and truest self, or the inner shrine, to be entered only through sacrifice and death, in which the mystery of the union between the divine and the human is consummated... 'Heart' has thus an all-embracing significance: 'prayer of the heart' means prayer not just of the emotions and affections, but of the whole person, including the body."²

Allow me to explain this last part. The 'prayer of the heart' mentioned here is what we call theoria, T-H-E-O-R-I-A, a Greek word, which, in English, essentially corresponds with the word contemplation. Simply put, theoria, is "the perception or vision of the intellect through which one attains spiritual knowledge ...Depending on the level of personal spiritual growth, contemplation has two main stages: it may be either of the inner essences or principles of created beings or, at a higher stage, of God Himself."³

Theoria, this 'prayer of the heart,' is often gained, though not exclusively, through the practice of hesychia, H-E-S-Y-C-H-I-A, a Greek word, which essentially means stillness. The hesychast, the one who practices hesychia, pursues a path delineated by "a state of inner tranquility or mental quietude and concentration which arises in conjunction with, and is deepened by, the practice of pure prayer and the guarding of heart and intellect—in other words, kardia and nous. Not simply silence, but an attitude of listening to God and of openness towards Him."⁴

Let's go over what we've heard so far. First, I explained the human person as being made up of five parts: the physical, mental, emotional, relational, and the spiritual. Next, I explained how the person is undergirded by and lifted up from the spiritual self, their inner life. Finally, I have shown how the inner life itself works. Why have I explained these concepts to you? Because when we use the phrase "inner peace," many people

¹ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2: The Complete Text*, p. 384. ² Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, pp. 383–384.

³ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, pp. 380–381.

⁴ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, p. 387.

tend to think of an emotional, physical, relational, or even financial state in which they feel satisfaction. In other words, for most people, “inner peace” simply means “without worry.” That is why I’ve tried to do something more here. Even if your religion defines this differently, the fact remains that we must teach our people that each person actually has an inner self that goes beyond mere ‘need’ or ‘want,’ that it exists in the spiritual heart; that the spiritual mind can contemplate God and/or that which is beyond physical presence or observation; that we can pray—contemplate actually—the Divine, the inner self, and its relationship with the Divine; and, finally, that there is an inner state of the person that can be quiet, still, and concentrated. Remember, this is important, and hear me on this. When we use the phrase “inner peace” it has to say something about a person’s desire to get beyond themselves; a desire for metanoia, literally that they want to pray, reflect, think, and live differently after the experience.

Outer Dissonance

In this second section, I will now provide you a look into the relationship between inner peace and familial or communal peace. But I will do this from the opposite direction. In other words, I want to tell you how a disjointedness can grow between the inner self and the outer self and what that means for relationships. Now, remember, I told you that humans are spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, and relational. I also told you that the spiritual aspect of the person integrates and enlivens the self. It is that which brings each of us into an encounter with God and our true self. Remember also, I said that if we ignore or maltreat the inner person, we are left with a seriously misanthropic, even malevolent, person. That is why now I will move to a discussion about the outer self, which is expressed through the physical and the relational.

When it comes to the physical body, it can be said that we have quite potent appetites. That is, we have desires of the flesh (e.g., sex and food), desires of the mind (e.g., power and wealth), and desires of emotion (e.g., anger and revenge). These aspects of the body, the mind, and the emotions “can be used positively, that is, in accordance with nature and as created by God, or negatively, that is, in a way contrary to nature and leading to sin. For instance, [the emotional] power can be used positively to ...intensify desire for God; but it can also, when not controlled, lead to self-indulgent, disruptive thought and action.”⁵ Literally, these are the fixations that can cause us to abandon our personal peace and participate in, or even enjoy, communal strife. We would all like to think that we are always part of the attempt at peace more broadly speaking, but in all reality, we must admit that we are at certain times and places part of the cause for discord and disruption.

⁵ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, p. 380.

Think about it this way: if we agree to the fact that there is something more inside the human person, this capacity for intellection, the knowledge that goes beyond, ostensibly into, God, we also must admit that there are other malevolent forces impinging upon us and enjoining us in the opposite side of the battle. This is what happens in that relational part of the human. In other words, there are human and demonic actors who encourage us—and in some cases demand from us—that we not only leave the interior life itself, but also leave aside the positive influences of it on our exterior life and the exterior lives of others. So, how does this work?

Generally speaking, these are the trials or tests we go through that force us to choose what is right and good, those things that come from the quiet, the calm, and the balanced ...and what is wrong and bad, those things that come from the loud, the chaotic, and the imbalanced. They come in the form of provocations, coupling, and assent. What do these mean?

The word “provocation” in the spiritual sense means the “incitement to evil ...[Even though we cannot completely stop these provocations], what does lie in [our] power ...is to maintain constant watchfulness ...[working at rejecting] each provocation as soon as it emerges into [our]consciousness...”⁶ Other momentary disturbances can lead us into what is known as coupling, which refers to our desire to entertain the ideas presented in the provocation. In other words, we “may begin to ‘entertain’ it, to converse or parley with it, turning it over in [our minds] pleurably, yet still hesitating whether or not to act upon it. At this stage ...the provocation ...has become a ...thought...”⁷ Then, we reach the stage of assent. “This signifies a step beyond mere ...‘coupling.’ No longer merely ‘playing’ with the evil suggestion, [we] now [resolve] to act upon it...”⁸

Now, take a moment to think about what I am doing here. At one level, I am explaining how the interior life exists and how it works. At another level, I am explaining how our exterior life can betray our interior life. Simply put, our bodies, our minds, our emotions, other people, and evil forces can betray us. And that means we can betray other people, too. That means we can be, and sometimes are, agents of behavior unbecoming men and women of faith. Thus, it stands to reason that an interior at peace will, more often than not, be a presence of peace in a family and a community. Conversely, an interior in chaos will, more often than not, be a presence of disturbance in a family and a cause of discord in the community.

⁶ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, p. 388.

⁷ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, p. 388.

⁸ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, pp. 388–389.

So, let's make this connection even deeper. The question before us today is about building a continuum between our interior search for God and the peace that comes from that, and the spreading of that peace beyond the self, into and beyond family, throughout the community, between and among other faiths, and as an example to other parts of society where men and women of faith bring hope and love where they are able to do so.

On this note, I would like to tell you a story. One night, as I was preparing for this talk, I noticed my Divine Liturgy book was sitting on my desk. This is the service book that I follow to preside at the main services of the Orthodox Church. I went through it page-by-page and noticed that in the parts of the service that do not change, we say the word "peace" out loud almost 40 times (and this does not include the silent parts prayed by the priest). Now, our regular Sunday service is about 75 minutes long. That means we pray for peace once every other minute. While I was counting this up, I also noticed that the word "mercy" is in there a lot too. In fact, the word "mercy" is said out loud more than 80 times in 75 minutes. That means we invoke "mercy" at least once every 60 seconds. This, perhaps surprisingly, provides a nice set up for the next part of my talk.

A Call to Mercy

In this third section, I will provide you with a perspective on interfaith and ecumenical dialogue ...and it starts with my own discovery. If the definition of the word harmony is a relationship in which various components exist together without destroying one another, then the watchword for the next generation of inter-religious dialogue must be "mercy." For decades, the inter-religious and ecumenical movements have used words like tolerance and understanding. But what the world needs more than ever is mercy. It seems to me that in every nook and cranny of this world, vengeance carries the day. We have become a wanton world dripping with bloodlust for even just a whiff of offense. And the retribution that follows usually outweighs the original transgression.

This vengeance existed with a slightly smaller stature prior to the pandemic, but it came out swinging with full force once the people of the world had to spend time locked up on their own. Instead of going deep within the spiritual self, looking to God for solace and redirection, asking what could be done differently or better, it seems that the general frustration with life in the Covid-imposed incubation of 18 months gave birth to a seething anger that was and is looking for anybody and everybody to take itself out on. Every man, woman, and child on this planet—who wasn't already a contemplative—suffered psychologically and spiritually because of the lockdowns. The lack of face-to-face interaction, the confusion, and the pent-up hostility led vast numbers of people to question themselves, to fear others, and to resent our differences. This is a specific example of how provocations, coupling, and assent grow and how they are manifested

in real, everyday human behavior. That is why every man, woman, and child of faith must be merciful and teach others about mercy. You and I and everyone in all these seminars across the world have some sense that at the base of these inter-religious discussions are people who want to help.

We know we want to grow in our faiths, in our spiritual lives, and for each person to live without the fear of retribution. In other words, each of us here, presumably, is seeking inner peace, which means we desire a deep interior connection with the Divine that is then carried outward into our interactions with families, communities, and the world. We want forgiveness and we want forbearance. That means we must find the strength to forgive and to forego the desire to punish, knowing full well the things our religions have done and what they have failed to do in the past. This all starts with each other at the familial and communal levels. And that's how we start, by setting an example that we can debate, we can disagree, but we refuse to be physically, verbally, and emotionally abusive to each other.

At the same time, this mercy of which I speak understands that there is a difference between socio-cultural and religious dialogue as a desire to know the other more completely and more personally—AND—the kind of inter-faith dialogue which seems married to syncretism and reductionism. We need to be the ones that say, 'we recognize the differences between each other' and forego the need to say 'we are the same' or that 'we need to let go of our ancient beliefs in order to have peace.' That is how and why mercy must reign between and among us. This will be our demonstration to governments, to organizations, and to people who refuse clemency, who refuse gratitude, and who refuse the blessing of billions of people who say their prayers every night before bed and every morning when they wake up.

Going Forward

In this vein, I recommend the following. Let us resist, together, the desire to associate ourselves with political, social, and religious movements that tear us away from the inner life of prayer. This is absolutely essential. In addition, I am recommending that we continue to learn more about each other's theology, spirituality, and religious practices. I remember fondly my days as an associate working with the director of the Center for Faith & Culture at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. We put on a conference called, "The Roots of Dialogue and Peacemaking in Sacred Texts and Traditions: Contemporary Implications for Judaism, Christianity and Islam." To be clear, the specific intention behind that conference was to focus on the Abrahamic religions, not to ignore other religions. Frankly, I would like to do something like that again. While no one conference or symposium could possibly cover the entirety of all the areas that need to be covered, the hope is that the specific character of such an event will advance the religious understanding of prayer and make a modest contribution to inner and community peace.

Conclusion

On that note, I will share with you that these ideas of mine have been gathered over a lifetime of prayer, ministry, dialogue, and study. Like many of you, I can say with complete honesty that from my earliest recollections to the time of my entrance into graduate school and ordination to the priesthood, and yes, all the way up to this morning, the constant presence of God in my life has been far too real to ignore. As a result, I have spent a great deal of time seeking the spiritually advanced and the theologically gifted to help give me perspective on something I began experiencing as a child. In other words, I know inner peace is real. I know that while familial understanding is difficult, it is possible to achieve. And communal acceptance, which can seem impossible, can be won, one discussion at a time. This is how we find a type of harmony that is constructive for faith groups as a whole, and a defense against the attempts to rid our world of deep inner prayer and reflection.

And now, I will leave you with this, a quote from a saint named Maximus the Confessor.

“Because He wishes to unite us in nature and will with one another, and in His goodness urges all humanity towards this goal, God in His love entrusted His saving commandments to us, ordaining simply that we should show mercy and receive mercy (cf. Matt. 5:7). The self-love and cleverness of men, alienating them from each other and perverting the law, have cut our single human nature into many fragments. They have so extended the insensibility which they introduced into our nature and which now dominates it, that anyone who has succeeded by sound judgment and nobility of intelligence in resolving this anomalous state of our nature has shown mercy to himself prior to showing it to others; for he has moulded his will and purpose in conformity to nature, and through them he has advanced towards God by means of nature; he has revealed in himself what it means to be ‘in the image [of God]’ and shows how excellently in the beginning God created our nature in His likeness and as a pure copy of His own goodness, and how He made our nature one with itself in every way— peaceable, from strife and faction, bound to God and to itself by love, making us cleave to God with desire and to each other with mutual affection.”⁹

Thank you and God bless you.

Bibliography

Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2: The Complete Text*. Faber and Faber, 1981.

⁹ Palmer, G.E.H., et al., editors. *The Philokalia Volume 2*, pp. 173–174.



From Inner Harmony
To Interfaith Harmony

03
PANEL ONE



Talk by Rabbi Peter Kessler

Congregation B'nai Israel, Galveston, TX, USA

(We were not able to transcribe his talk due to problems with the sound recording. The panelist reserves the right to share the content. Individuals who are interested in the panelist's talk should contact him directly.)

Biography

Rabbi Peter Kessler was born and raised in Chicago and received his B.S. degree in Business Management from the University of Illinois. He received his Master's Degree and Ordination from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1995 and 1996, respectively. Rabbi Kessler received his Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa) in May 2021. Rabbi Kessler is the proud father of a son, Floyd, an art student at Alfred University in upstate New York. He is proud of his extensive work in interfaith and community outreach and his vision for a congregation that is open and welcoming to all types of Jewish families. His decision to come to Congregation B'nai Israel in Galveston is predicated on the warm and cohesive community he found during his search for a new pulpit. "I fell in love with the people at Congregation B'nai Israel," said Rabbi Kessler, "and I look forward to being part of the wonderful community of Galveston."



Talk by Bishop Michael Rinehart

***The Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
(ELCA), Houston, TX, USA***

Biography

Michael Rinehart is Bishop of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a community of over 100 congregations, campus ministries, retreat centers, and other agencies. Bishop Rinehart studied music at Valparaiso University, a Lutheran university in Valparaiso, Indiana, focusing on organ performance and singing in the VU Schola Cantorum, Chorale, Concert Choir. He received his Master of Divinity at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. He lives in Montgomery, Texas, with his wife and children.

Welcome everyone. I am Michael Rinehart, Lutheran bishop in this area. Our synod is a community of about 100 congregations. This congregation is the oldest. Many thanks to our hosts.

I am a Lutheran Christian. In short, we are Christians in a Lutheran key. We find peace through trusting in God's grace and love for all people and living in the freedom of the gospel, revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Interfaith dialogue in relationships is important for a number of reasons:

1. Because, based on his Jewish tradition, Jesus taught love of God and neighbor as the center of the Torah; this means we are called to love our neighbor, especially our neighbor of different faiths. Jesus practiced this, even commending the faith of the Samaritan woman and the pagan Roman centurion. Mutual respect means we must listen to one another and understand one another. We do not see the other as enemy, but even if the other sees us as enemy and wishes us harm, Jesus taught us to love our enemies. From this we begin to experience what Paul called "the peace that passes all understanding."
2. We can learn from one another. We don't know everything. Everything we do know is penultimate. We listen and learn.
3. We live in a pluralistic society (especially here in Galveston/Houston), and therefore we must strive to live alongside one another in mutual understanding and love.
4. Late in his life, Martin Luther wrote some disturbing and unethical anti-Judaic and anti-Islamic things. Because of this, our church has repudiated these writings and feels a particular duty to engage in interfaith relations for the healing and harmony of the world. Inner harmony and outer harmony are not inextricably tied, but neither are they mutually exclusive. Inner peace expresses itself in outer peace.
5. At this time in our nation's life and history, we are seeing a spike in hate speech, anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-Semitism, as well as incidents of harassment and violence directed against these and other minority religious and ethnic communities. People of conscience need to build bridges. We are called to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24) in Houston and Galveston, and an attack on any one of us is an attack on all of us, so we have committed to one another to band together and times of crisis. So, rabbis, imams, priests, and pastors, in Houston meet together regularly, listen to one another, eat together, work together where we can, and stand together when we must. This does not mean we agree on everything. This means that we stand together in mutual respect, recognizing one another's human dignity, and listening deeply to another about matters of faith and life. Our church has 12 commitments to peace in Interfaith relations, laid out in the ELCA's 2019 A Declaration of Inter-Faith Commitment.

We participate in God's mission in an increasingly multi-religious world. Locally and globally, there are examples of religious communities coexisting peacefully, but also examples of conflict, violence, discrimination, bigotry, intolerance, and persecution. In the midst of this, God has entrusted to us a vision of unity, justice, and peace. Therefore, in faithful response to God's love in Christ Jesus, we are called and committed to:

- Seek mutual understanding with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews.
- Cooperate with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews as instruments of God's justice and peace.

Across the ELCA, the form of our inter-religious relations will vary depending on context. As a church, we hold these commitments in common as a policy to guide our work and as a measure of accountability to our inter-religious partners.

1. The ELCA will pray for the well-being of our wonderfully diverse human family, including our neighbors of other religions and worldviews (ELW, Prayer for the Human Family, p. 79).
2. The ELCA will articulate why we both cherish the gospel, Scripture, the creeds, and confessions at the core of our Christian identity and Lutheran self-understanding and seek to understand our neighbor's core identity and self-understanding in a spirit of mutual respect ("Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct," the World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue & World Evangelical Alliance, 2011).
3. The ELCA will witness to the power of life in Christ and through our daily lives. We will seek to be ethical, transparent, and concerned for the integrity of our neighbor's rights and religious sensibilities as we share our faith with others (Report from Inter-Religious Consultation on Conversion, World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 2006).
4. The ELCA, in dialogue with our partners, will seek to understand the religions of the world so as to enhance mutual understanding as well as to be able to identify the misuse of any religion to justify oppression, such as violence, genocide, or terrorism.
5. The ELCA will seek to know our neighbors in order to overcome stereotypes about them, "to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light" (Small Catechism, Eighth Commandment).
6. The ELCA will explore and encourage inter-religious friendship, accompaniment, and partnership with all who seek justice, peace, human wholeness, and the well-being of creation (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 4.03.f).
7. The ELCA will, whenever possible, work with other Christians and through ecumenical and inter-religious coalitions in its quest for inter-religious understanding and cooperation ("Lund Principle," 1952).

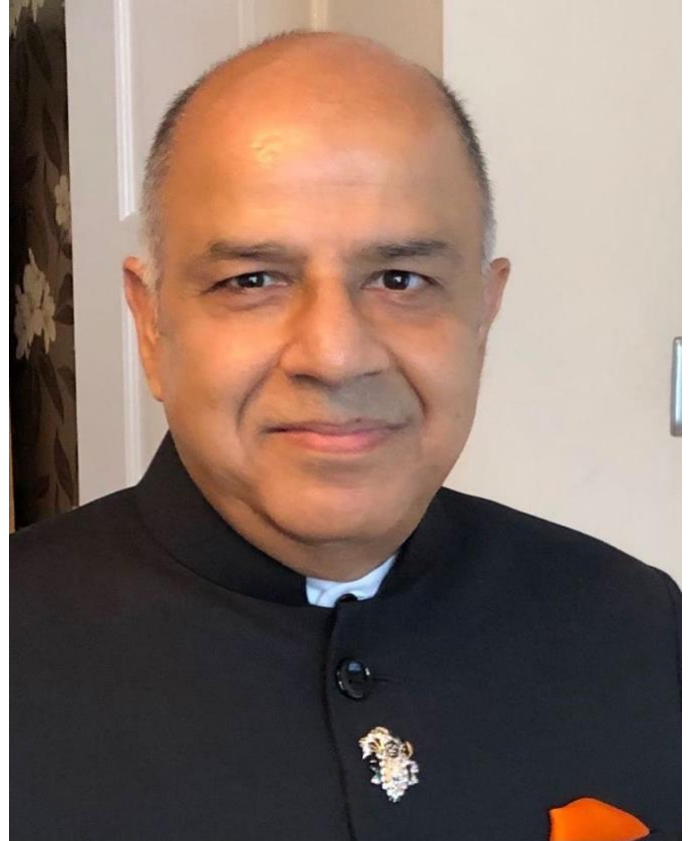
8. The ELCA will seek counsel from other religious groups in its discernment of and advocacy for the common good.
9. The ELCA will defend the full participation of all in our religiously diverse society, “strengthening public space as a just place for all” regardless of religion or worldview (“The Church in the Public Space: A Statement of The Lutheran World Federation,” 2016).
10. The ELCA will defend human rights and oppose all forms of religious bigotry, violence, discrimination, and persecution and stand in solidarity with those who experience them, whether they are Christian or of another religion or worldview (“Human Rights” ELCA Social Message, 2017; “For Peace in God’s World” ELCA Social Statement, 1995; “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture” ELCA Social Statement, 1993; “Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” ELCA Social Statement, 1991).
11. The ELCA will confess when our words or deeds (or lack thereof) cause offense, harm, or violence to our neighbors of other religions and worldviews and will repent and seek forgiveness from God and reconciliation with our neighbors (“Luther, Lutheranism, and Jews,” The Lutheran World Federation, 1984; ELCA “Declaration to the Jewish Community,” 1994; ELCA “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” 2016).
12. The ELCA will produce study and dialogue materials and pastoral guidelines for understanding and engaging with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews and seek counsel from inter-religious partners in the development of such resources.

Examples of our work in this area:

- 1994 ELCA Declaration to the Jewish Community
- 2022 ELCA Preaching and Teaching “With Love and Respect for the Jewish People” ● 2022 ELCA Declaration to the Muslim Community
- 2016 ELCA Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery
- 2020 ELCA Guidelines for Ministry in a Multi-Religious World
- ELCA website on Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Matters
- Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations
- We developed a study guide for congregations on the 6-CD series, *Discover Islam*, which Discover Islam, USA, sent to all ELCA pastors
- The ELCA was a founding member of the interfaith campaign, *Shoulder-to-Shoulder: Standing with American Muslims, Upholding American Values*

These are just a few examples of this important interfaith work.

We are called to proclaim our faith with joy, but this does not mean we are called to tear down the faith of others. There are no examples I can find where Jesus tore down the faith of others. In fact, there are plenty of examples in the gospels where Jesus commends the faith of those from other religious traditions. We find peace walking in his footsteps, following his example, respecting one another, learning from one another, and standing with one another in the face of religious bigotry and persecution.



Talk by Mr. Rajnish Kashyap

***General Secretary, Hindu Council UK Advisor,
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities External
Panelist, Scottish and Southern Electricity Network***

Biography

Mr. Rajnish Kashyap is an experienced speaker on Diversity and Inclusion, particularly specializing in the Hindu faith and Hinduism. He has been a consultant and advisor to both local and national government in the United Kingdom (UK). He has been working in the profession of credit management for the last 35 years. Born in India, he moved to the UK when he was 18 years old. He has always been passionate about his faith and social justice and was able to express a profound interest in voicing his knowledge of Hinduism. As the General Secretary of the Hindu Council UK, he is able to promote social justice and welfare for the Hindu community in the UK. The journey he has taken has taught him many different elements of faith and community work; however, he would not have been able to learn this without actively participating in interfaith activities. This has broadened his knowledge of other faiths and allowed him to be more appreciative of the different faith communities in Britain.

Hello everybody—good evening and good afternoon. I'm from London, United Kingdom. Namaste, ladies and gentlemen.

I was invited to speak on the interfaith discussion from seeking inner peace, facilitating interpersonal and family harmony, to the religious community in the post-pandemic world. I think two years ago, I was invited to speak on a pandemic and how harmony can be gotten together during the pandemic time. We had a good conversation on that. Now, the pandemic is moving away. We have come back to more normal discussions and normal life together.

There are various views of harmony in life. Of these, the prominent external ones are family harmony, workplace harmony, relationship harmony, religious harmony, spiritual harmony, social harmony, harmony of nature, and so on.

Interpersonal relationships are at the core of what is to be a human. It means the extent to which an individual is able to establish and maintain long-term, mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships; family harmony is an extension to this relationship by focusing on a simple structure to identify and clarify family values and using those values as guideposts in family. However, the most important is inner harmony. Inner harmony can only be achieved when there is balance in relationships with others. Inner harmony is nothing but a feeling of peace of mind derived from self-acceptance—acceptance of the people and circumstances around, and acceptance of the past. Harmony is a necessary condition for development, progress, fulfilment, overall happiness, and survival of both the individual and the group to which he or she belongs. It unites people despite their diversity and prevents enmity, wars, and conflicts. Fortunately, harmony is a choice for which you can consciously opt. It is a mental condition rather than the physical environment you are placed in. You can acquire and sustain your inner harmony simply by embracing an appropriate attitude towards life situations.

Hinduism has a long history and countless traditions and approaches that are impossible to be fully covered here. I will only try to offer a rough sketch of Hinduism's basic ideas and the aspects that are more characteristic of Hindu religious thought, although it is possible to find alternative views on any of the points discussed here. The pursuit of salvation in Hinduism starts with discovering the true self. Hinduism posits that the self consists of material and nonmaterial aspects. The innermost nonmaterial self of each individual is called Ātman. The ultimate reality that embraces all beings and is at the heart of the universe is called Brahman. Brahman is the one supreme, universal spirit that is the ultimate grounding of everything. It is without form, indescribable, indefinable, and purely absolute. Hinduism posits that at the most basic level, Ātman and Brahman are identical. The ultimate goal of Hindus is to realize this unity, to become one with Brahman. In other words, they aim at attaining a high consciousness that can understand that Ātman is indeed Brahman. Thus, obviously, unlike many western schools, Hinduism does not make a sharp distinction between humankind and the Divine.

On this basis, the whole of life is seen as a preparation for salvation in Hinduism. Salvation involves transcending the ever-recurring cycle of life, death, and rebirth (called Samsara). Salvation can be achieved by liberating oneself from all bodily bonds. Only such a bodiless self is regarded as the true self. This self enjoys the highest state of consciousness that is nonrestricted.

Every person's degree of bliss and joy is believed to depend on how successful he or she is on the path towards such spiritual knowledge of the self and Brahman. Spiritual and inherent knowledge is highly emphasized in this doctrine. This sort of knowledge is transformational and is equated with becoming: "One who knows Brahman becomes Brahman." True knowledge should not be imparted by others. It should not be rational or intellectual. Instead, it should come from one's own experience, which as mentioned earlier, requires the development of a high bodiless consciousness. This necessarily comes through moral development, freeing the mind from selfish desires, and self-control. Emphasizing spiritual knowledge, oneness of existence, and the identification of the Divine and humankind makes Hinduism a spiritual religion. It does not come as any surprise that Hinduism advocates a spiritual version of happiness and harmony. In such a doctrine, true joy comes from contentment and peace of mind brought about by constantly acknowledging that in everything dwells the Supreme Being (Brahman). The factors that contribute greatly to peace of mind are giving up all illegitimate desires, avoiding greed, and attachment to temporary and material objects (e.g., wealth and fame), egotism, and anger, which are considered to be cardinal vices in Hinduism. By avoiding these vices, one can be liberated from the material self, and ultimately become one with Brahman.

Hinduism emphasizes virtues and righteousness rather than hedonism in conceptualizing happiness. The concept of Dharma is very important in defining virtues in Hinduism. Dharma is the principle that governs the universe, society, and individual lives—the supreme and all-encompassing regulatory principle. The whole world and human affairs are controlled and operated by Dharma. Humankind's role in the Hindu worldview is to support this universal cosmic order. In general, virtue (personal or social, material, or spiritual) in Hinduism amounts to acting in accord with Dharma. That is to uphold order in this world and curb actions which may disrupt the soul's harmony with cosmic and societal order. For example, human behavior should never lead to the disruption of nature or the heavenly realms. Cardinal virtues of Hinduism include gratitude, nonviolence, limitless compassion, and generosity. Other virtues include controlling the mind so that it can firmly rest on the object of interest, and enduring hardships without lamenting and becoming upset. Acting in accordance with these virtues is believed to lead to a state of harmony inside and with the outer world.

In sum, Hinduism emphasizes the practice of virtues and a contented state of mind as key ingredients of a good life. Virtue should take place in the context of an individual's yearning for transcendence from the material world. The end state of salvation is an egoless state with a limitless compassion for the rest of creation. Throughout the journey to salvation, genuine knowledge and intuition are privileged over rationality and intellect.

If you are still bothered by events occurring in the world outside or tormented by unjust attacks by people around or haunted by unpleasant memories, just look inwards and find the ever-flowing stream of peace and harmony that is your real self. You will never be disappointed.



Talk by Venerable Dr. Miaolung Shih

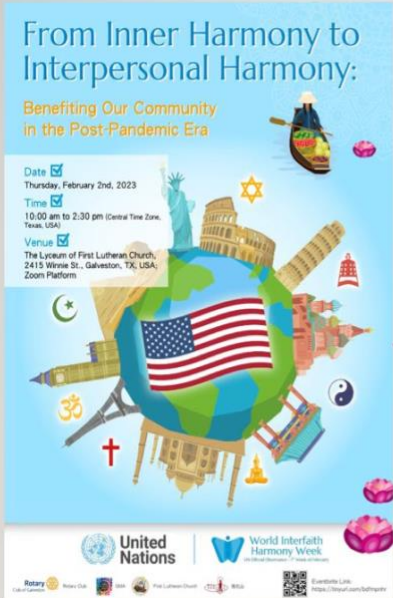
***Instructor, the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX
Dharma Teacher, International Buddhist Progress Society, Dallas, TX, USA***

Biography

Venerable Dr. Miao Lung is an instructor based at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas, leading a research project on development of dementia care by apps and artificial intelligence. She is also a Dharma Teacher based at IBPS Dallas (Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, Texas Branch). In addition, she is a member of Parliament World's Religions; American Academy of Religion; and the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, New York.

Hello, everybody! I am Miao Lung from Dallas, one of the Buddhist organizations in north Texas. As you can see from the screen, we are running a pre-school, Sunday school, and afternoon school education program. People here are nice and in harmony. All of us, we would like to help the people, and because the education system belongs to the Texas education department, even if you are not Buddhist, but, for example, you are from Hinduism or Judaism, we welcome everyone to study and learn in our education center.

Today, I am going to say something about inner peace from our founder Master Hsing Yun. I learn from him, and also share the story about the inner peace of him. When he was a small child, he found the monastery life to be so difficult. He made the decision when he was 12 to become a monk. Everything that he learned was from different Buddhist Masters when he was young. He led the life in the temple for more than 80 years. He learned lots of things about how to find inner peace.



From Inner Harmony to Interpersonal Harmony:
Benefiting Our Community in the Post-Pandemic Era


Date Thursday, February 2nd, 2023
Time 10:00 am to 2:30 pm (Central Time Zone, Texas, USA)
Venue The Lutheran Church, 2415 Winnie St., Galveston, TX, USA; Zoom Platform

In September 1992, at the invitation of Dharma friends in Dallas, Master Hsing Yun established the BLIA Dallas chapter, and in 1993, purchased a three-story office building with 35,000 square feet of space in Richardson. The Master personally conducted the inauguration ceremony on September 11, 1994 which has since provided a spiritual home to Buddhist practitioners in north Texas.

1111 International Parkway, Richardson, Texas 75081
+1 972 907 0588

United Nations | World Interfaith Harmony Week

佛光山 F.G.S.



LIFE IN THE MONASTERY WAS DIFFICULT

- Life in the monastery was difficult, especially for a young novice monk like Hsing Yun. He lacked wealthy benefactors to support him, and he was not old enough to earn money by performing funeral rites. He survived on the barest of necessities. When his robe became tattered, he would mend it. When the soles of his shoes wore through, he would line them with cardboard. Even when Hsing Yun was able to find some paper scraps to write home, his letters remained unsent because he could not afford postage.

Becoming a monastic, the first stage is to take the ordination. The disciplinarian Masters will train you on lots of things, and you have to learn and be very humble. In China, if you did not follow the disciplines, you cannot avoid a beating. That is kind of serious punishment. For being a powerful people in the future, you have to be very concentrated, especially for young people.

This was 15 years ago. Nowadays, we don't have any more beatings. That happened before, when traditional education in the monastery was still serious. When I was 24, I became a fully ordained monastic, and no one beat me. But in the traditional Chinese Buddhist monastery, they have a really unreasonable approach to make you become a very humble person. So sometimes you gave a lot of reasons to defend yourself, and then you just got a beating. The beating becomes a kind of reminder: you have to be very concentrated about, you should be very humble, and learn about compassion and how to get along well with each other.

DURING THE PERIOD OF ORDINATION TRAINING

- During the period of ordination training, the already stringent discipline of Qixia Monastery was escalated to unreasonable heights, and those who broke the rules would be beaten with willow twigs by their preceptors. Aimed at humbling those seeking ordination and breaking their sense of ego, there was often nothing that could be done to avoid a beating.
- “Once the preceptor asked me if I had ever killed any living beings,” Hsing Yun remembers, “I answered, ‘No!’ and suddenly was struck with a willow branch. ‘You haven’t even killed any mosquitoes or ants?’ I was questioned. I quickly changed my answer and admitted, ‘Yes, I have killed living beings,’ I was then struck again, because killing living beings is breaking one of the precepts.” “The preceptor then asked if my teacher had told me to come to be ordained. I answered, ‘No, I came on my own.’ I was then struck a third time, ‘Your master didn’t tell you to come? So you just do things on your own? That deserves punishment!’ I accepted the beating humbly and said, ‘Yes, it was my master who told me to come.’ The preceptor then shouted, ‘So if he had not told you to come, you would not have done so?’ I was then struck a fourth time.”

Venerable Master Hsing Yun, his life in the early days, faced a lot of challenges. He would like to do an education system. He always told the disciples, if you don't know how to work with the people, with the interfaith, and you're talking in your life, it doesn't make any meaning because you didn't benefit others. Based on the education, core concept, Master built many Buddhist colleges and five universities. That is incredible.

Master always found inner peace because he would respond to such a good idea. That is education. And more and more, the students, like me, became disciples of him. All of us went to Buddhist College. You have to become a disciple. You have your choice when you went to the Buddhist College. We did the same things. We would like to help the people and benefit others, not only just finding our inner peace.

THE EARLY DAYS BROUGHT MANY CHALLENGES

- The early days brought many challenges, but the fruits of the labor began to steadily emerge. First, 29 Eastern Buddhist College and 5 Universities was finished. Then, they built a shrine to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva called the Great Compassion Hall, and a couple of pavilions. Hsing Yun worked daily and often well into the night, ensuring that students could have free lodging, tuition, books, and clothing. More and more students came, and Fo Guang Shan Monastery began an exponential growth. Thousands of volunteers inspired by Hsing Yun's vision and dedication devoted their time to help manifest the dreams of what this place could be.

HSING YUN ENCOURAGED HIS DISCIPLES TO SEEK OUT A BROAD RANGE OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

- Early on at Fo Guang Shan, Hsing Yun encouraged his disciples to seek out a broad range of educational opportunities. He paid for his disciples to attain Ph.D.s abroad in fields like education, management, and religious studies. Some people criticized him and said those students would never return. Hsing Yun, however, had confidence, patience, and a fatherly demeanor with all his disciples. He visited those who were abroad, made sure they had what they needed for their studies, and comforted them in times of stress. His patience paid off as those disciples returned, applied their knowledge, and become leaders within Fo Guang Shan.

Master Hsing Yun gave me lots of different educational opportunities, not just from books. Yes, Master had lots of contributions about the Dharma teaching. But of all these things, he would like to invite people to understand what Buddhism is, what the Buddha taught, which does not mean being against any religion. Our Master also had a lot of interfaith ideas. That's why I got a chance to learn how to be an interfaith and interactive monastic. That's a great idea from Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Master Hsing Yun had diabetes, but his diabetes didn't make him weak. He was still very productive and did calligraphy. He made people learn something beautiful about Chinese culture and intrigued their interest in the some of the meaningful words. Here is a short video and you can see how Master Hsing Yun found inner peace after diabetes. View the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FltgRzg-CM4>. I hope you enjoy it. Thank you!

ONE-STROKE CALLIGRAPHY: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

- Fifty years ago, constant starvation caused Master to become diabetic. Complications caused calcification in my eyes, and my vision continued to deteriorate. As I could barely see clearly, I was no longer able to read books or newspapers. Other than giving lectures and narrating articles, I could do nothing but write calligraphy.
- As I am unable to see, I can only estimate the spacing between characters. Once the brush is dipped in ink, I will write it fully with one stroke. If I am unable to finish in one stroke, then I will not know where to start the second stroke. Relying on my intuition, no matter how many characters I have to write, I must finish it in one stroke in order to reach my goal. Thus, it is called "One-Stroke Calligraphy."
- "To Enlighten Sentient Beings" calligraphy exhibition inside the National Art Gallery in Malaysia. Subsequently, the exhibition went to UC Berkeley and University of the West in the United States; Hunan Provincial Museum, Three Gorges Museum, Nanjing Museum, and Yangzhou Museum in China; Hong Kong Central Library and Hong Kong University; Australia, Auckland and Christchurch in New Zealand; and Taiwan. Of note, the exhibition at University of the West was most amazing to me. Many years ago, my calligraphy piece that said, "A moment of mind that comes to the West" helped raise funds to establish the university. Twenty years later, it became the first university, established by a Chinese organization, to be accredited by WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges).



Talk by Imam Dr. Muhammad N. Haq

***The American Society for Islamic Awareness (ASIA Center Mosque)
Adjunct Professor of Religious Studies, Department of Comparative
Cultural Studies, University of Houston (Main Campus), TX, USA***

Biography

Dr Muhammad Haq is the Imam of the American Society for Islamic Awareness in Houston, Texas. In addition to delivering sermons throughout the United States, he is an Adjunct Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Houston. Moreover, he is a marriage counselor and an official service provider for premarital coaching in the state of Texas. Imam Haq earned his Ph.D. from the University of Punjab in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. His dissertation surrounded Christian-Muslim relations, which he has utilized to conduct numerous interfaith programs in the greater Houston area. In addition to his doctorate, he completed his Higher Studies Teaching Certification at the Derek Bok Center at Harvard University and is a founding board member of the Iqra Math and Science Academy. As the Vice-President of the Houston Imams Association and in his capacity as a liaison with local law enforcement, Imam Haq is a firm believer in building bridges through savory foods, sweet desserts, and plenty of dialogue.

Hello everybody! My name is Mohammad Haq. I am an Imam in a mosque in the Webster area. I am also an Adjunct Professor at the University of Houston in Religious Studies. I'm very thankful for this occasion. Unfortunately, I could not participate physically. I will be saying things with respect to the religion of Islam and interfaith. As far as the inner peace is concerned, I believe all the religions basically have the purpose of getting inner peace.

When it comes to the teaching of Islam, there are two kinds of peace which is considered extremely important. Because of these two kinds of peace, all the other life becomes full of peace. One is peace with God, and the second one is peace with fellow human beings. This is what is the meaning of Islam, which means "the peace." If an individual has good relations with his creator, or our creator, and he has good relations with the people around him, that brings inner peace, and makes him a source of peace to everybody around him.

When it comes to the peace with God, we do not have a war with the God. But when we disobey God, or when he becomes unhappy when we do something which is not right, which is not good, then we damage, or we harm, that peace with God. In order to be peaceful with God, prayers, supplications, worship, obedience, doing the right things, and avoiding evil are what brings us peace with God.

As far as peace with fellow human beings is concerned, it's not only that we care for them, we love them, and we have an empathy with them. But we have feelings and sentiments of forgiving them. When there is any chance, when there are things that we don't like, then we have been asked to be forgiving. That is one of the most important things.

One of the major characteristics of God, which has been repeatedly mentioned in the *Quran*, the religious scripture of Islam, hundreds of times, one characteristic of God that has been repeatedly mentioned is that he is most forgiving, he is most merciful. The Prophet Muhammad says that one should try to adopt the characteristics of God. So every human being should be forgiving, should be merciful to the other people around us, and that ultimately brings the inner peace. When I forgive somebody, when I help somebody, particularly the people in need, the deprived people. That's why orphans, widows, the poor and the needy have been repeatedly mentioned in the Scripture... that we should take care of them.

One of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad is "peace is upon him." He said that if you have eaten a dinner and somebody in your neighborhood has slept hungry, God or Allah will not accept your prayers and your supplication. That is care. That is the key with the people around, and that is what moves us with our own inner peace. When I feed somebody, or when I forgive somebody, that really gives me a good sleep and that is when I think that we achieve inner peace.

As far as the interpersonal and family harmony is concerned, in the religion of Islam, and I'm sure in other religions also, the relationships with the immediate family are the most important ones. The people who are closest to us. The relationship with them is the most important, and then those people who are further and then those who are further. For example, the most important people around us to start with are our parents, then our spouse, then our children, then our relatives, then our neighbors, then our friends, co-workers, and any person that they interact with frequently. The more frequently we are interacting with them, the more important it is to keep peace with them, to be caring about them.

There is a term which has been repeatedly mentioned in the Islamic literature. In Arabic language, it's called 'Silat Al-Rahm,' which means cultivating, maintaining, and keeping good relations with the relatives, with the closest family members. There are several verses in the *Quran* and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, taking care of the neighbors, irrespective of what faith, what race, what color is your neighbor; neighbors have been categorized into permanent neighbors, regular neighbors, and temporary neighbors. Any person next to me, if somebody is sharing in a seat next to me in a bus, in an airplane, in a train, that is my neighbor for that time. I need to take care of that as much as possible. Trying to make everybody around me as comfortable as I can. That is basically bringing the peace, not only with ourselves, but also with family members, friends, and all the circles that we move in.

Of course, we spent the last couple of years in a pandemic. There have been so many challenges. I want to share it with my other brothers and friends of different religions. This is the time that the real role of religion needs to be emphasized. Religion, by itself, has a purpose in the life. It is not just a set of rituals that we have to perform. The religious obligations, religious responsibilities, religious worship, religious acts, religious prayers, they have meanings in life. And that is particularly the case in this post-pandemic situation when people are feeling more stress, more depression. Psychiatrists are busier than physicians nowadays. I was surprised to learn the other day that there is a 3-month waiting time to see a psychiatrist. Why? Because this post-pandemic situation has left people with a lot of challenges: loss of jobs, inflation, and many dear ones and our loved ones have died during the pandemic. This has left people really needing religion, which brings the peace which gives strength and relief in the time of stress and depression. I think that all the religions, the interfaith platforms, the world religious forums, whatever inner harmony or interpersonal harmony. This is the time when we really make our religions work and show others how it is working by taking care of the people around us and helping each other, through charity, volunteerism, and feeding the hungry. This is the right time.

I think that the human has always been in need of religion, but it is an important time. Religions are not there to hate each other or to go against each other. I am a student of world religions and the history of religions. I strongly believe that religions never preach for anyone to fight, or to go against or kill anybody. Religion is only being misused sometimes for other political and economic reasons. But religion is just being misused. Pure religions never make us go against anybody. I think this is what we need to understand more, and we need to share more. We need to take care of the people around us all over the world. I believe this is a very good forum. The organizers have arranged this. I am sure that good things will come out of this. Sorry again that I could not be there myself, personally, but I am happy that I could share a few thoughts with you on Zoom. May God bless everybody and thank you so much!



Talk by Reverend Dr. Duane Larson

***Senior Pastor, Christ the King Lutheran Church, Houston Lecturer,
Department of Comparative Cultural Studies,
University of Houston, TX, USA***

Biography

Reverend Dr Duane Larson is a Systematic/Practical Theologian with strong experience and credentials in the fields of theology and science, comparative inter-religious ethics, and ecumenical/inter-religious dialogue. His main current research focus is on Moral Injury, particularly in the context of military ethics and character/leadership development. His long career includes service as a congregational pastor, theological seminary professor, and seminary president. He is currently the Senior Pastor at Christ the King Lutheran Church, Houston. A member of the American Academy of Religion, He also served on the Board of Directors of the Foundation for Interconfessional Research, Strasbourg, France. Dr. Larson's work also includes advocacy for racial justice in Houston and peace-making in the Middle East.

He received his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, in 1993, after affirmation of his dissertation, "The Temporality of the Trinity; A Christian Theological Concept of Time and Eternity in View of Contemporary Physical Theory." Among his many published books and articles, recent publications include *Care for the Sorrowing Soul, Healing Moral Injuries from Military Service and Implications for the Rest of Us*, with Jeff Zust (Eugene: Cascade, 2017); "Luther's Influence on the Rise of Natural Science," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, a digital and hard-print project, Paul Hinlicky, Derek Nelson, Johannes Zachengruber, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and "A Prescription for Moral Injury," *dialog, A Journal of Theology* (54:2, June 2015).

Introduction

I'm honored to be here with these fine panelists and all of you. Our goal this afternoon is to identify challenges we face after the pandemic and how to redress them through interfaith practices. To do this, I want to speak compactly and formally, taking into account the concerns of the Cambridge students who have asked us to remember our post-pandemic context and what that can mean for such things as being nurtured into a wisdom and compassion that can face suffering and even death with courage and hope. I will speak quickly about method (how we can better be with and for each other) and cite a theological example or two, as well as a personal experience.

About Method

As for method, it is important to know who you are and what baggage you carry. I'm a Christian theologian and pastor of "the Lutheran type." I am also somewhat afraid and amused to be named as "the Christian" representative on this panel. I am aware of my inability to re-present Christianity. As scholars are quick to remind, there is no one such thing anymore as Christianity, because so many really different and even antagonistic groups self-identify as Christian. That's the sociological reality.

As a Lutheran, I am a Christian of a certain theological accent. But I'm enough of an historical and systematic theologian, as well as a pastor, still to believe that Christian commonality is greater than our differences, which is also to say that I also can tell the difference between a horse and a jackass. So let me be clear: Martin Luther, whose name my particularly accented tradition has carried since the mid-16th century, is not our highest authority. Jesus Christ is. I hope that gives me some license to represent a very broad swath of Christianity on this panel.

One of Christianity's Most Important and Most Influential Early Theologians

I can refer to another historical figure who looms over most all of Christianity, including Orthodoxy... one whose theology has influenced so much of what and how Christians think still today (for better and for worse). I refer to the North African theologian, St. Augustine (354–430). Consider something Augustine said about "how" to approach the "other"; in his case, how to have a civil and productive conversation with people whose beliefs he very much disputed, the Manicheans, a group with whom he was aligned in his youth. "I can on no account rage against you... Lay aside such arrogance on your part too, so you may be more disposed to gentleness... Let neither of us assert he has found truth; let us seek it as if it were unknown to us both." [He wrote this in a treatise called, "Against the Fundamental Epistle of Manicheus," and after the introductory chapter titled, "To Heal Heretics is Better than to Destroy Them." That, of course,

sounds arrogant.] Augustine affirmed the rhetorical requirement of humility so as to generate good conversation. It also helps make clear that while Augustine was all about listening as if for the first time to “the other,” he also presumed that the listener had better know oneself and one’s beliefs.

But understanding only at a cognitive level does not yet bring one to a fair appreciation of the other. There must be practice; one must “do the rituals,” or at least attend to them as an appreciative participant observer. Augustine already had full personal experience with the Manicheans. And, he understood that theology was “second order; that is, that theological reflection necessarily follows prayerful practice; we theologize on what we have experienced (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). So, to understand at least somewhat the affective and abstract qualities of another’s faith in a religion, one must practice it to some degree as well as talk with the other about it to some degree; one must pray in their shoes (or socks, if the conversation partner is Muslim).

A Personal Experience of Interreligious Grace

I experienced this truth in a most winsome way many years ago when I was invited to pray one Friday night with a new group of Muslims in the area. I readily accepted. I was also interested because they had purchased a former Lutheran Church, converted it into a worship center, and so I wanted to see what the God of Abraham was up to there. Before the prayer time, while over a meal, their new Imam from Tehran asked me if we were required to memorize the Bible. I had to answer no, of course; the Bible is much too big for human memorization in toto. And, I confessed, I found most people who have memorized large sections of the Bible (and usually, curiously, the memorization was from the Old Testament) uncomfortable to be with. The Imam was required to memorize all the *Quran*, and to do so along with rightly chanting the suras. He wasn’t bragging. He simply wanted to know a bit about what we more cherished in biblical teaching, and about that I highlighted the Gospels. His motivation for asking was revealed in the midst of the evening prayer, at a moment when the Imam was free to choose whatever he thought right for the moment from a Sura to chant. And about that he was most gracious! He sang a Sura about the high regard for Mary, the mother of Jesus.

What hospitality! And what a marker to recognize how we of different religious traditions can truly pray together! What that Imam did for me was grace. I could not have known that grace had I not been a participant observer, a pray-er. Indeed, I could not have experienced that riveting holy moment had I not practiced some Augustinian spiritual humility myself. The end result is an experience of grace that could only happen when I knew myself and my convictions well enough to just listen and be in the space of grace with the person of difference; of course, having recognized already that there was enough commonality and mutuality of understanding there for us to be together.

This is an Augustinian attitude of both self-respect and neighborly love. It honors the dignity of the other even during harder conversation. It recognizes the image of God in the other as in yourself. This attitude proceeds from foundational things we believe about God in the Abrahamic tradition. It also coheres, I think, with the eastern faith tradition language of transcendent un-nameable divinity; foundational principles like there is no God/Divinity but God/Divinity; and that we know God/divinity as the insuperable Love that infuses all the creation; that this Love is personal; that this Love, this God is patient with everyone, which literally means that God suffers with everyone.

The Augustinian/Lutheran Theology of the Cross: Solidarity in Suffering

As a Christian, in other words, my vocabulary proclaims that God suffers with each of us in a way concordant to each of our unique personhoods. That's a fundamental principle about God. It stems from what Augustine began as a certain kind of theology and what Martin Luther early in his career called "The Theology of the Cross." God fully revealed God's intentions in the life, suffering, and death of Jesus, and, having so assumed all that we humans go through, promises that suffering and death is not the last word through the sign of the resurrection. So, if you want to know how best to serve God in the neighbor, meet the neighbor in his or her suffering because God is there as much and as uniquely as surely God is uniquely with you and me in our suffering lives. And there will be joy in the midst and after our suffering because God is present with us with a sense of our future as it will be, thick with loved ones, an anticipation for us of the future already awaiting us post-suffering, even post-pandemic.

Conclusion

With the cruciform call to respect each other's particularity, especially by redressing suffering, we are powerfully inspired toward more mutual and effective inter-religious practice of neighborly love and care for the earth. Of course, all of this is summarized popularly in The Golden Rule. I've simply lifted up a central, yet now ironically too often ignored, Christian perspective, along with the general principles of graciously listening to and graciously participating in another's tradition as much as is possible, so to build harmony. Make music. Music with good harmony produces overtones that grace hearers with almost mystical awe. It is what Love does.

The following notes were not used. They are supplied here, nonetheless, since they were prepared for the possibility of live conversation generated by the questions posed by students in the planning process for this event.

Young people's strategic concerns:

- The practice of interfaith harmony
- Teaching religion to younger generations
- Applying religious wisdom to life's problems
- Constructively dealing with study/work pressures in the new post-pandemic era
- Courage to face aging and death

The "tactical" questions related to the above:

- We've been separated and distanced from each other. Now many already have normalized that, withdrawn even more from neighborliness, notwithstanding the concomitant rise in adolescents of depression and its maladaptive attendant behaviors. There also arguably has been a rise in narcissism in the general population, along with much playing on fear and victimization by propagandistic power interests. Given this, how then do we develop empathy with and care for others of clearly different cultures and beliefs?
- How do we face moments that challenge our most basic beliefs/predispositions with courage and wisdom oriented to interfaith harmony?
- How do we develop self-control? My phrasing: How do we cultivate response-ability rather than reactivity?
- Can the language of the classics and religious texts [which I also will class as "normative classics"] be used effectively toward the attainment of wisdom? How can we promote the reading of classics for oneself?
- I would focus on the meaning of "classic" as a text that transmits through and across generations upon generations as comforting and meaningful for personal and communal life, notwithstanding the inevitable cultural, ethnic, and epistemic differences that emerge with time and geography. Literalism cannot achieve such a classic status. Cf. John Crossan's well-known quote: "My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."
- How to discipline children while maintaining creativity and exploration?
- How faith can overcome fear of death and find joy after loss of a loved one. This

goes hand-in-glove with the collective experience of loss and fear as they do with the personal. Here I might draw on my own present experience of grief after my wife's death not long ago.



Talk by Dr. Bee Scherer

***Full Professor and Chair of the Buddhist Studies Department,
Rector of the Buddhist Seminary,
Free University/Vrije Universiteit (VU)
Amsterdam, the Netherlands***

Biography

Professor Dr. Bee Scherer is the Chair of Buddhist Studies and the Rector of the Buddhist Seminary at Free University (VU) Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Dr. Scherer founded the Queering Paradigms network and the interdisciplinary Social Justice research institute (INCISE). After studies in Germany and the United States, they received a Ph.D. from Groningen University in 2002. Before joining the VU in 2020, Dr. Scherer was the Director of INCISE and the Chair of Religious Studies and Gender Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom. Dr. Scherer is also a longstanding practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism and a Dharma teacher.

Diamonds Sparkling on the Ever-Breathing Fabric of Being: Virtues and Buddhist Impulses for Interfaith Dialogue

Distinguished colleagues and guests,

I am very grateful to the organizers for allowing me to participate by prerecorded video since I am currently travelling to Japan.

While many in the world slowly attempt to leave the shadows of Covid behind, we still face great challenges to our future from impending climate collapse, wars, famines, and continuing and sustained social injustices. As practitioners and representatives of religions, we need to ask ourselves: Do we want to be part of the problem and continue as before? Or do we want to be part of the solution, and dare to think of new ways to achieve harmony—environmental harmony, social harmony, and harmony—in ourselves? Religion and interfaith relations are critical at those concentric rings of 和 he (harmony) that Ven. Master Master Hsing Yun 星雲 of Fo Guang Shan addressed in his conception of the five harmonies, which widen from internal harmony to wider and wider layers to the harmony between other ‘people and myself’: ren wo he 人我和 based on mutual respect (敬 jing). Respecting the earth, the ecosystem, the individual lives that the living earth (gaia) sustains, and the human lives in their complex relationships to each other appears to me a logical extension of Hsing Yun’s Human World or Humanistic Buddhism to becoming Bio- and Ecocentric Human World Buddhism.

In this context, Buddhist philosophy teaches us two important impulses.

Firstly, everything arises, abides, and ends; everything is impermanent. At the same time, the play of manifestations is without beginning or end. This life, world, and universe simply appear and cease, just as continuously we breathe in and out: we experience the beginningless and endless breath of phenomena, the breath of the world, the breath of being. So, we can relax and stop taking ourselves so seriously. We do not need to fear nor expect anything. Happy and painful experiences will arise and cease like the tides.

Secondly, like all ocean tides connect to one big body of water in the gravitational pull of the earth-moon system, so our own experiences always connect to those of all beings. Our well-being is never isolated from the conditions that other beings experience, nor is our suffering. The world that we experience is deeply intertwined and arises interdependently. When we act clumsily and selfishly, others suffer. When we let go of the small “I” and think the great “we,” suffering gradually declines. The great Buddhist

Master Thich Nhat Hanh called this ‘interbeing.’ This interconnectedness stands and falls with our willingness to challenge our own narcissistic and egotistic impulses. The Avatamsaka Sūtra (華嚴經, huayan jing) uses the image of a net of jewels wherein each individual jewel reflects the other and is contained in the other and all jewels endlessly—Indra’s Net: we are like these precious jewel knots in an endless fabric, where we relax the ego and polish one little diamond—the whole net sparkles! This is what is meant by ‘deep interfusion’ (圓融, yuanrong). East Asian Buddhist philosophy elaborated this worldview intricately to the relational holism that forms the basis of much contemporary Buddhist approaches to ecological and social crises. Making these two Buddhist impulses fruitful for interfaith harmony in the post-pandemic experience, I suggest focusing on the virtues needed for a successful dialogue.

(1) Understanding impermanence, or, if you like, our contingency, our human condition, we can relax our inflated senses of importance.

(2) Understanding our interbeing, we can listen deeply and experience our shared humaneness in diversity across the divides of our worldviews, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, gender, sexualities, embodied and neural diversities.

Interreligious dialogue for harmony can only work when we are coming together in a shared desire to listen and understand and respect our different views; we fail when we want to proselytize, show the superiorities of our views, or try to convince each other as if in competition. When one or each participant in an interfaith dialogue wants to “win,” everyone will lose. I want to point to the thought of Catherine Cornille (professor of Comparative Theology at Boston College) who states that interfaith dialogue is ‘an exchange in which participants are willing to listen to and learn from one another’ (Cornille 2013, 20). She points out five necessary conditions of such dialogue: epistemological humility (humility about what we can know and our means of knowing), commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality (Cornille 2013). Just as Master Hsing Yun points to respect (敬 jing) as the foundation of relational harmony, Cornille points to the necessity of dignity and respect with which every partner in interreligious dialogue equally needs to be treated. For this journey, we need to be willing to learn about and from each other and to understand each other: without this, dialogue becomes meaningless.

Living with, feeling with, and appreciating the dialogue partner—inter-connected diamonds in Indra’s Net—does not take away our diversity and our distinguishedness; in harmony freed from the selfish hybris of the ego—the small “I”—the great “We” can sparkle as polished and relational, yet diverse, jewels on the ever-breathing fabric of the world.

Reference

Cornille, Catherine 2013. “Conditions for Inter-religious dialogue.” *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. By C. Cornille. Croydon: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 20–33.



Talk by Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway

***Levenson Chair and Associate Professor
Department of History, Florida Atlantic University, FL, USA***

Biography

Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway is Levenson Chair and Associate Professor in the Department of History at Florida Atlantic University. He researches the history of religion from the pre-Han period in China through the development of Buddhism as it crossed East Asia. The first stage of his research was to establish a new model for understanding how religion developed in early China. This involved analyzing recently discovered manuscripts buried in a tomb from 300 BCE in what is now Hubei Province. He has written two books on this subject that were published by Oxford University Press. They are entitled, *Guodian: The Newly Discovered Seeds of Chinese Religious and Political Philosophy* (2009), and *The Quest for Ecstatic Morality in Early China* (2013). He is currently writing his third book, which will employ the model he developed based on recent excavations to shed new light on the development of Buddhism in China.

What I would like to talk about today is interfaith dialogue between Buddhism and Confucianism.

This map here is about 2000 years ago, this interconnected world, where the Abrahamic religions and Eastern religions were in contact with each other. This has continued throughout these past 2000 years. And it is from this contact that I hope to show how there are important connections in terms of the power of prayer and also the understanding of sin and its forgiveness between Confucianism and Buddhism. And through that, hopefully, allow you to understand how this map really shows the connections between the faiths of the world today.

Initially, I want to talk about the importance of sin and forgiveness in Buddhism and Confucianism. In Buddhism, there are very specific ceremonies which enable a person to be forgiven for their sins. In these ceremonies, we ask bodhisattvas to forgive the sins. The sins are understood as things that we do ourselves (若自作) or things that we might ask someone else to do (若教他作). The third one is that if we see a sin, and we do not act upon it, then we ourselves are committing a sin (見作隨喜). So, for example, if I steal a car, of course, that is my sin. If I ask someone to steal a car for me, that is still my sin. And if I see a car stolen and I don't call the police, that's also my sin. Thus, those are the sins as they are defined in Buddhism. If we commit sins, then we ask for their forgiveness. We cannot continue to do them, and then we are freed of those sins.

In Confucianism, there is not a specific ceremony, but Confucius did ask us to every day be introspective about our sins and the behavior that we have done which is incorrect. And Mencius also talks about the daily struggle to maintain the goodness that we are imbued with from our youth. Although the details of how sins are forgiven might differ between Confucianism and Buddhism, they both have a notion of a daily practice of trying to maintain this goodness.

What is most interesting, I think, however, is the importance of prayer. I believe that by showing the importance of prayer between Buddhism and Confucianism, the importance of it also with Abrahamic religions will come forward. This is where this map finally has some value.

What you're looking at here is a map of China. This is the Silk Road. This is the Taklamakan Desert, which means you go and you don't come out. Here is Dunhuang, an oasis town, before the beginning of the Silk Road. You can see that here.

In the early 20th century, Paul Pelliot and Aurel Stein went and found a library cave where manuscripts were hidden away, secreted away, and when this site was going to be overrun. These manuscripts can give us insight into the personal practices of Buddhism a thousand years ago. This one in particular, I think, is rather insightful for understanding the power of prayer for Buddhism. For those who don't read Chinese, what you see here is an image from the British Museum. It was a man who in the year 911 A.D. offered a prayer for someone who he felt he had wronged. This other being happened to be his ploughing ox. He prayed, "On behalf of one old ploughing ox I reverently copied out the Diamond [sutra] in one chapter, and the 'shou ji' in one chapter, praying that this ox may personally receive the merit there from, and be reborn in the Pure Land, never again to come to life in the body of a domestic animal. May this be clearly ordained by the officers dispensing justice in the underworld, so that there may be no further enmity or quarrel [between the ox and its owner]. In the first month of the 'xinwei' year [circa A.D. 911]." He felt he was indebted to this ox, and he prayed that this ox would go to heaven after he had died. This is the concluding of that prayer—the sutras that he copied out. This is the colophon to it. "Humbly on behalf of my old ploughing ox, that its soul may be reborn in the Pure Land, and when Maitreya is born on earth [as Buddha] it may participate in his first assembly, where all shall hear the Holy Law."

This connection between prayer and the forgiveness of sin... you can see in this Buddhist prayer from the year 911 A.D. If you were to ask this man, "Are you Buddhist, are you Confucian, or are you Taoist?" he would be very confused by this. Because for him, the offering of prayers is something which is done monthly for ancestors for those who have died the first and the fifteenth of the month, and the next fifteenth would be this coming Sunday on the lunar calendar. So that's when prayers would be offered to those who he loved, who had departed. That process of praying for the deceased is often categorized as ancestor worship. I really don't like that term because it exoticizes prayers for loved one's family and friends who departed. What really struck me was a conversation I had a few years back with my aunt who is 80 years old; she has been a Catholic nun for over 50 years. She told me that when she prays, she prays to her mom, my grandmother, and that struck me as amazing because praying to family members by the textbook is this Confucian practice. Yet it is also this human practice.

Finally, I want to share this idea about the importance of prayer for Confucians, and also Buddhists, by sharing a personal story. Prof. Bee Scherer's overview of what is Buddhism was really fantastic and I agree with their overview. But what I want you to contribute to that is how rare is this vehicle by which we deal with the negative effect that we experienced when we are encountering these endings in life. We are facing the potential of our mortality, or deep sickness. This was fall 2021, the fall semester when my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had been the emcee for a fellowship meeting, a Buddhist North American fellowship meeting. When I when I first heard the news, I was going to pick up groceries at Whole Foods, stopped in the parking lot, and I called the nun in New York, Venerable You Wang.

I said, "You're not going to believe this. Shuling has breast cancer." She said, "There is a big prayer service coming up, 'The Emperor Liang Repentant Ceremony.' We're doing it in New York over the course of five days. They're doing it in Texas; the Dallas, Houston, and Austin temples are coming together, doing the ceremony together online. It will be a Friday through Sunday. You really should do this." I said, "It's online. Is that going to work? This is something that's personal. You want to be there." She said, "Let Venerables worry about that. You just show up online and pray. This will help you through this difficult time." The Texas prayer service happened to be the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, before my wife started her chemotherapy on Monday. We spent all day, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. These prayer services last eight hours, and it's a lot of kneeling and chanting and bowing together. It's very intense, very meditative. You are in this meditative prayerful state for eight hours a day for three days. Through this, we are able to face our anxiety, and our fear, and the unknown. When we went to chemo on Monday, it was with a fresh and energized self.

I don't feel that that process of praying for loved ones and family members is something that is different. Because prayer for health and wellness is very much part of Confucian practice and teachings and texts, as well as Buddhist ones. And it's through these prayers to loved ones, whether they be alive, or who have passed, or who are in difficulty during these difficult pandemic times. This is something that unites Confucianism and Buddhism. I think for all religions it's through our prayers and our community of prayerful people that we can face the challenges of life and come together and be strong.

I thank you for this opportunity. I thank you the organizers for bringing us together. It was a privilege to be here, and I look forward to hearing the rest of the presentations. Thank you very much!



From Inner Harmony
To Interfaith Harmony

05

APPENDICES

1. Event Planning Committee Members



Reverend Richard A. Rhoades

Pastor of First Lutheran Church, Galveston, TX

Reverend Richard Rhoades is a pastor based at First Lutheran Church of Galveston, Texas. He was ordained as a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in June 1990. He has served the following ministries: Curwensville Area Lutheran Ministry, Curwensville, PA; Friedens Lutheran Church, Gibsonville, NC; Kimball Memorial Lutheran Church, Kannapolis, NC; Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Newington, NH; and most recently First Lutheran Church, Galveston, TX. Pastor Rhoades has served as a Dean in both the North Carolina Synod and Texas Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod of the ELCA. He has served on numerous boards and is currently the Acting President of the Lutherhill Ministries Board. Rev. Rhoades has participated in community ministerial groups and most recently served as President of the Galveston Ministerial Alliance, an interfaith association of religious leaders. He attended Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, before transferring to The Ohio State University, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Genetics. He also studied at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, where he was awarded a Master of Divinity Degree.



Venerable Dr. Miaolung Shih

Instructor, the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX
Dharma Teacher, International Buddhist Progress Society, Dallas

Venerable Dr. Miaolung Shih is an instructor based at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas, where she leads a research project on development of dementia care by apps and artificial intelligence. She is also a Dharma Teacher based at IBPS Dallas (Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, Texas Branch). In addition, she is a member of Parliament World's Religions; American Academy of Religion; and the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, New York.

Dr. Huey-Ming Tzeng (RN, FAAN)

Professor, School of Nursing

The University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX

Dr. Huey-Ming Tzeng is currently based at the School of Nursing, the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas. She holds the Odelia Brown McCarley Endowed Professorship in Nursing, where her focus is on care quality and patient safety for older adults, especially those with dementia. Her mantra is 'love,' an action verb. Her vision is to embrace holistic health through aging research.

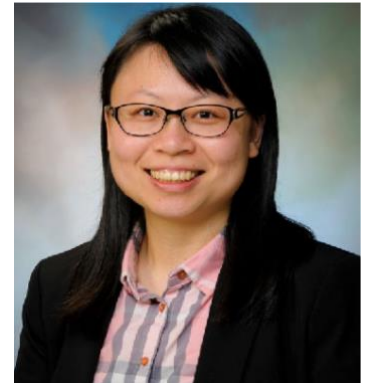


Dr. Wei-Chen "Miso" Lee

Assistant Professor, Department of Family Medicine

The University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX

Dr. Wei-Chen "Miso" Lee is a health services researcher and assistant professor at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. Her research focuses on examining health disparities in racial minorities and rural populations and identifying strategies to address disparities found. As a native of Taiwan, she resided in Taipei before coming to the U.S. 14 years ago.



Xinying (Tracy) Liu

PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology Department of Social Anthropology University of Cambridge (King's College), UK

Tracy is a student based in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Her research project stands at the intersection of the anthropology of ethics and the study of Humanistic Buddhism, pivoting on her long-term participant observation of Fo Guang Shan branches across different continents. With a passion for interfaith harmony, she has participated in the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week event as a facilitator for four consecutive years.



2. Invitation Letter

Dear ***,

We would like to extend a warm invitation to you to attend the upcoming United Nations (UN) World Interfaith Harmony Week event on Thursday, February 2nd, 2023, at the lyceum of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Galveston, Texas, from 10 am to 2:30 pm (Central Time, USA). This year, our event theme is: From Inner Harmony to Interpersonal Harmony: Benefiting Our Community in the Post-Pandemic Era. Your presence will be beyond valuable to us.

The UN World Interfaith Harmony Week is an annual event promoting mutual understanding, harmony, and cooperation between all people regardless of their worldviews, religions, and faiths. Over the last three years, the world has been fighting a pandemic, and this has tested the faith of many. In 2020, we discussed the “Five Harmonies” and how to heal the mind, and in 2021, the topic was finding inner joy in what we hoped would soon be a post-pandemic world. In 2022, we focused on how to create interpersonal harmony and honour our shared diversity.

We are excited to announce that our 2023 event will have Reverend Dr. Thomas Colyandro, Orthodox Priest, as our keynote speaker and outstanding panelists, Rabbi Peter Kessler, Reverend Michael Rinehart, Reverend Dr. Duane Larson, Imam Dr. Muhammad Haq, Mr. Rajnish Kashyap, Dr. Bee Scherer, and Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway. The event will be hosted in a hybrid format combining both virtual platform and in person gathering. We invite you to be part of the conversation to share your faith, values, and practices with each other. For more information, please check the attached poster, agenda, and registration link in this email.

Thank you for your time and we look forward to seeing you at this event!

Yours faithfully,

Reverend Richard Rhoades
Pastor of the First Lutheran Church of Galveston



Venerable Dr. Miaolung Shih
Dharma Teacher, International Buddhist Progress Society-Dallas (Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order,
Texas Branch)
Member of Parliament World's Religions



3. Interfaith Blessings

**THANK YOU to the Sponsors
Of Today's Event.**

—
**The Rotary Club of Galveston
Foundation**

—
The Galveston Ministerial Alliance

—
**Fo GuangShan Buddhist Temple
At Dallas**

—
**First Lutheran Church
Galveston**

**How will you mature in fostering
inner peace?**

**How will your inner peace help shape
your interactions in the
greater community?**

**What will you treasure from
today's event**



*Blessings
From the
First Annual
United Nations
World Interfaith
Harmony Week Event
Galveston, Texas, USA*

February 2, 2023

**The Lyceum of
First Lutheran Church**

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sustained us, provided for us, and allowed us to reach this moment in our lives.

(Shared by Rabbi Peter Kessler, Congregation B'Nai Israel, Galveston, TX)

Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah
Sarve Santu Niraamayaah |
Sarve Bhadraanni Pashyantu
Maa Kashcid-Duhkha-Bhaag-Bhavet |
Om Shanti Shanti Shanti ||

Meaning:

- 1: Om, May All be Happy,
- 2: May All be Free from Illness.
- 3: May All See what is Auspicious,
- 4: May no one Suffer.
- 5: Om Peace, Peace, Peace.

(Shared by Mr. Rajnish Kashyap, General Secretary, Hindu Council at the United Kingdom)

Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth,
present in all places and filling all things,
treasury of goodness and giver of life, come
abide in us, cleanse us from all stain of sin,
and save our souls O, Good One.

(Shared by The Reverend Dr. Thomas Colyandro, Orthodox Priest, Galveston, TX)

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord's face shine on you with grace
and mercy.

The Lord look upon you with favor
and + give you peace.

Amen.

(Shared by The Reverend Michael Rinehart, Bishop of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Houston, TX)

佛光四句偈

佛光星雲 (1927~)

慈悲喜捨遍法界，惜福結緣利人天。
禪淨戒行平等忍，慚愧感恩大願心。

Foguang Four-Line Verse

by Venerable Master Hsing Yun (1927 - ,
Fo Guang Shan)

English translation: Fo Guang Shan
Monastery

May kindness, compassion, joy, and
equanimity pervade all Dharma realms;
May all people and heavenly beings
benefit from our blessings and friendship;
May our ethical practice of Chan,
Pureland, and Precepts help us to realize
equality and patience;
May we undertake the Great Vows with
humility and gratitude.

(Shared by Venerable Dr. Miaolung,
Dharma Teacher, IBPS Dallas; Member of
Parliament World's Religions; American Academy
of Religion; NGO Committee on Status of
Women, New York)

4. Photo Gallery



Photo1. Group photo of on-site participants.



Photo 2. The event was hosted by Rev. Richard Rhoades.



Photo 3. Keynote speech by Fr. Thomas Colyandro.



Photo 4. Speakers (left to right), Father Thomas Colyandro, Rabbi Peter Kessler, Rev. Dr. Duane Larson, and Bishop Michael Rinehart.



Photo 5. Group photo of each table.



Photo 6. Group photo of each table.



Photo 7. Group photo of each table.



Photo 8. Group photo of each table.

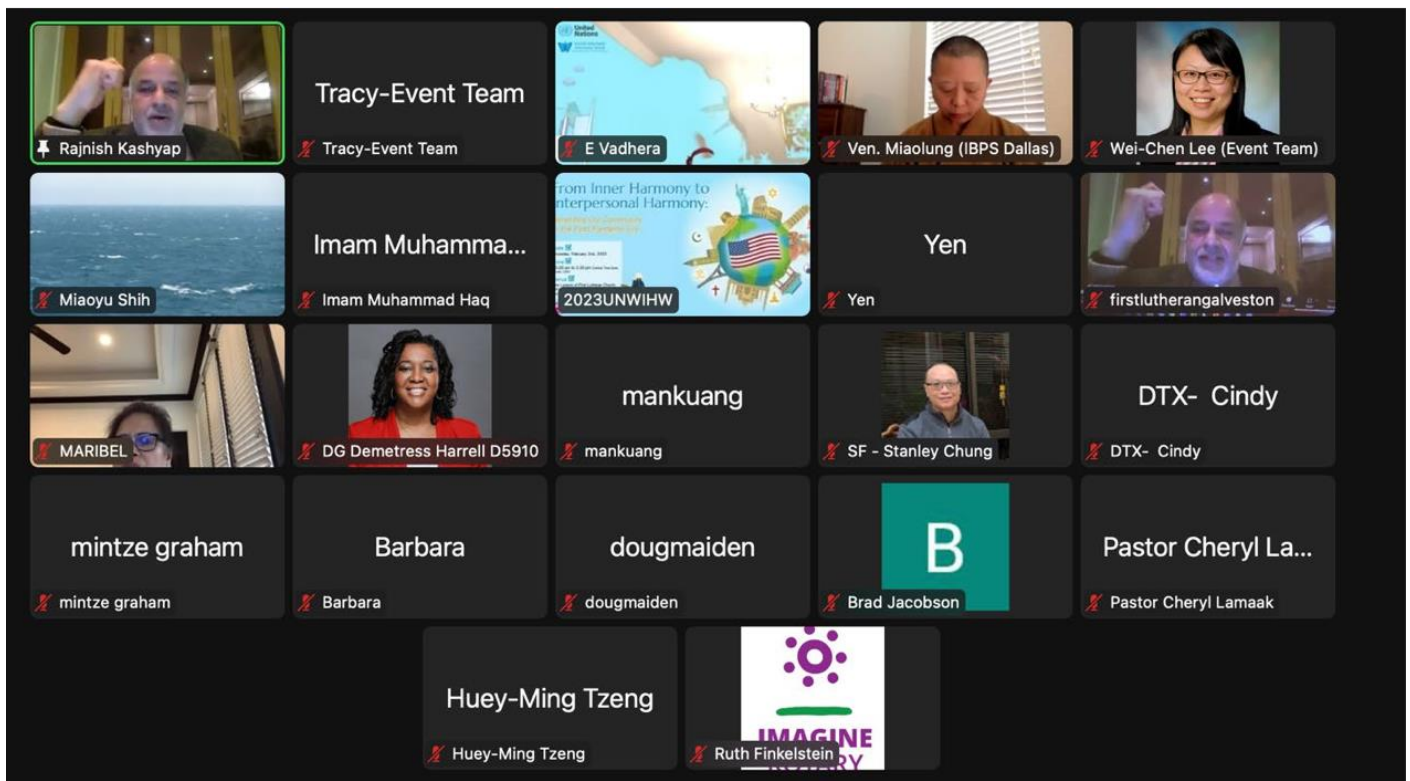


Photo 9. Online participants.



Photo 10. Online participants.



Photo 11. Group photo of staff members (front, left to right), Susan Stakes and Adam Palmer; back (left to right), James Agrella and Diane Denson.



Photo 12. Event Planning Committee members (left to right), Ms. Xinying (Tracy) Liu, Rev. Richard Rhoades, Dr. Huey-Ming Tzeng, Dr. Wei-Chen “Miso” Lee, and (photograph at right) Ven. Miaolung Shih (on the screen).



**Parliament Affiliated World
Interfaith Harmony Week Event**