

Pilgrimage in Abrahamic and Other Faiths: Recovering America’s Narrative of Religious Pluralism¹,
by Michael Kuchinsky

“All of us, from the time we begin to think, are on an odyssey.” Romare Bearden

In times of increasing polarization, can contemporary religion guide us to a vision of religious pluralism so essential to the American historical experiment, and one that may now be threatened and at risk? Can today’s religious organizations advocate for religious pluralism and be taken at their words and deeds? Is such a visionary pilgrimage still fertile ground for American—even global—society in the beginning quarter of the 21st century?

For much of its history, the United States (USA) has journeyed and been a place for journeys into the prospects and meanings of religious freedom and tolerance for many of the world’s peoples. Call it a type of national pilgrimage made up of many seekers and pilgrims who wanted the promise of religious pluralism. Formative events and political mile markers dot our historical landscape and created a national narrative that could favor religious pluralism and acceptance. In our country’s first centuries, a steady stream “of the hopeful” found the Puritans, Quakers, early Maryland’s Roman Catholics, Mennonites and Anabaptists, Huguenots, Moravians, European Jews, the North Carolina Waldensians, the ever-Westward pushing Mormons, Salzburger Lutherans, early African-Methodist-Episcopalians journeying down Philadelphia streets to find dignity in a new location for a church and entries to the nation by way of escape or immigration for many other religious communities.

This pursuit to find openness of belief also included the many religious and secular utopian societies who experimented with alternative visions for a more peaceable or prosperous kingdom—the brothers of Ephrata, Shaker communities of the East and Mid-West, the Amish, the Rugby community of Tennessee, or the various layers of utopian efforts crossing the frontiers who sought home in New Harmony, Indiana. And in the country’s last one hundred years, there would be more journeys by non-Europeans hoping for equal accommodation for their religious practices, a thriving inter-Christian ecumenical discourse to lessen boundaries of misunderstanding, and an increasingly active interfaith dialogue about that which may be truly exceptional within the American experiment—religious pluralism.

Beckoning these pilgrimages to come ashore can be found our anchoring statements for making real the exceptional qualities of religious openness and tolerance. Some of these highlights would include the First Amendment of the American Constitution, James Madison’s Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments, the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty, Rev. Martin Luther King’s speech at the Lincoln Memorial, and the many Supreme Court decisions that affirmed religious liberty or protected religious pluralism. George Washington’s response letter (1790) to the Touro Synagogue of Newport, Rhode Island, became an early defense of these statutes and principles declaring the government to allow “no sanction for any bigotry.” One could even argue that the recent Pew Report findings on current religious pluralism in the United States, and the increasing presence of “none-ness,” could be another

indicator of the country's religious/spiritual shifts partially due to the nation's religious tolerance or in some cases the lack of the same.

Obviously "*the road is long and with many a winding trail*",² and the letters "USA" do not equate to some Pollyannaish panacea of absolute and reciprocated religious acceptance! All of us can point out historical setbacks in the history of the national or local communities, and many of us have experienced ridicule or worse over personal religious expressions or principles. *And events in our present-day circumstances suggest that the nation and its citizens need more chances for dialogue about and between religious differences in our shared public space, as well as more mediators and exemplars of such dialogue.*

Consider some traditional thoughts about pilgrimage. Pilgrimages are intentional journeys. As events they can be powerful, clarifying, or formative, underscored with meaning. To be on pilgrimage usually requires a beginning point or purpose and a destination or compelling vision that pulls the pilgrim forward with hope. The pilgrim taking the journey is self-aware of that purpose though never unaware of the new learnings and intersections crossed while journeying. The seeker is interested in the outcomes for these will offer her/him a fuller and completed vision. A traditional pilgrimage may involve a re-creation or an awakened awareness of something that is part of a past or forgotten experience central to the faith; or it may also employ methods to invigorate and sustain new meaning and purpose.

Though pilgrimages are often highly personal, the walk to energize and sustain the exceptional vision of a religiously pluralist society where different religious faiths are valued partners of the American experience is a relational journey, and a collective and national pilgrimage. Even though this may not be a conventional pilgrimage, it complements what most religious faiths embody already as a theological concept or spiritual behavior. Consider just a few examples to express the point.

Most religious traditions, and certainly the Abrahamic faiths, embrace the task of pilgrimage as a means of restoring faith, affirming religious principles, and deepening the sense of purpose for the believer. The "Wailing" or "Western" Wall in Jerusalem, homes and burial places of Jewish scholars and rabbis, and other sites of scriptural importance become pilgrim destination points within Judaism. Torah traditions before the destruction of the temple prescribed important pilgrimage times to return to Jerusalem (feasts of Passover/Pesach, Tents-Booths/Sukkot, and Weeks/Shavuot), and though no longer mandatory still attract believers to Jerusalem during these times. Now, simply the return to Israel can become a pilgrimage of personal and spiritual significance reconnecting with heritage, community, or family.

Christians regularly go to Jerusalem and follow along the *Via Dolorosa* to contemplate and try to relieve the final hours of Jesus. Or they may go elsewhere in Israel and Palestine to encounter the traditional sites of his birth or his ministry. Rome because of its central and manifold importance for different part of the Christian faith and Assisi in Italy on account of one of Christianity's most beloved saints, or the ancient sites of the Apostle Paul's ministry from Syria, to Turkey and Greece become places of historical and spiritual remembrance. Christian martyrs attract followers whether they might be in Canterbury or Compostela. Wittenberg in Germany and other locations associated with the Protestant Reformation regularly attract historical and spiritual seekers for encounters with renewed meanings.

Islam institutionalizes pilgrimage in faith through the performance of Hajj to the main mosque in Mecca. The pilgrim performs numerous acts of preparation, ritualized actions, and prayers entering and while in the mosque, circling the Kaaba before reenacting Hagar's search for water, Abraham's sacrifice of Allah's provision of a sacrificial sheep, and climb Mount Noor to recall the first transmissions of the Koran to Mohammad. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Hajj institutionalizes the government's commitment to assist pilgrims estimated this year to be over 3.4 million observers. In addition, the Shiite faithful may journey to Karbala in Iraq to observe the martyrdom of Hussein.

Eastern religious traditions also embrace the importance of pilgrimage. The Baha'i and Buddhist faiths venerate places considered historically significant to the Buddha or to Bahauallah. Hinduism has no shortage of pilgrimage sites and opportunities related to sacred cities or natural locations, places linked to acts and lives of the gods, and major temple sites.

Perhaps to be a part of a faith tradition is to be in pilgrimage, on a spiritual journey, much as to be human was to be involved in an odyssey for the American collage artist, Romare Bearden. The American vision for a religiously pluralist, celebratory, and tolerant community is a pilgrimage within the wider history of humanity, or at the very least, in the social narrative of American life. But why is this urgent? Is there something about our time and place which requires a more immediate and contemporary response? Is the vision threatened?

Earlier this year, the tragic shootings in a Wisconsin Sikh temple made visible the vicious reminder that religious, ethnic, and racial hatreds still exist with a vengeance in the second decade of 21st century America. A Cable News Network (CNN) article repeated the fact that the first retaliatory death in the post-September 11, 2001 America was a Sikh gas station owner in Mesa, Arizona and which started years of violent incidents.³ The same article quoted the Sikh Coalition of New York as saying that more than seven hundred attacks and bias-related actions have been leveled at Sikhs and Sikh institutions since the 9/11 attacks. Speaking after the Wisconsin shootings of her experiences as a Canadian Sikh, Ms. Kamal Arora wrote "These are (small) incidents (ones from her childhood and adulthood), but among the many experienced by Sikhs, Muslims, and other racial and visible minorities in North America on a daily basis. Yet as we have seen recently in Wisconsin and elsewhere, these emotions have escalated to become matters of life and death."⁴

Would that the tragedy and its narrative of violence and discrimination be a singular, awful event! Evidence from different faith traditions about anti-religious violence or harassment in America pushes the would-be interfaith activist further. A poll done by The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) recently assessed that four out of ten Americans admit to an anti-Muslim prejudice, while a 2006 poll indicated that only about two percent of Americans felt that they were very knowledgeable about Islam. CAIR's "Islamaphobia Project" had identified that eighty-eight mosques and Islamic centers had been the targets of hate, violence, or vandalism, with the mosque in Joplin, Missouri destroyed by fire after having sustained multiple attacks. According to CAIR, seventy three anti-Islamic bills had been making their way through state legislatures between 2011 and 2012. The statistics are echoed by the Southern Poverty Law Center who reported that Anti-Muslim groups had tripled in the last two years, and

Federal Bureau of investigation statistics counted one hundred sixty hate crimes against Muslims in 2010.⁵

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) charts incidents of anti-Semitic violence across the United States. In the ten years following 9/11, ADL counts stood at 14,942 incidents of vandalism, threat, assault, or harassment including every US state. The mean of just below 1500 incidents per year reflects a high of 1821 in 2004, and a low of 1211 in 2009.⁶ Indeed, of 699 hate crimes counted by New York State's Office of Justice Research and Performance for the year 2010, 39.3% (275) were anti-religious in nature, and second only to the 284 incidents (40.6%) involving race, ethnicity or national origin.⁷

This history of crimes and other incidents, in an environment of religious suspicion, misunderstanding and bigotry moves activists to act to recover the national narrative of religious pluralism. So it was for the leaders, supporters, and volunteers who make up Clergy Beyond Borders...and through the ancient practice of pilgrimage!

As part of its ten year memorial to the changes wrought by 9/11 events, and to all the victims of that day, CBB organized a caravan to promote inter-faith dialogue, religious attributes of conflict resolution, and the need for basic information and education about religious diversity. The caravan offered a chance for literally hundreds of Americans of every religious faith to ask questions, listen to one another, and try better to interpret the importance of religious dialogue in their communities. The caravan became an eleven-state, eighteen-city, three thousand mile-journey across the Mid-Atlantic, Southeastern and Mid-Western portions of the United States. Using workshops, presentations, and advocacy visits to state and local officials, CBB's message, much like the prayerful decal on the side of the van, was that the country/world was a part of one humanity who also reside in one ark. The image of "one ark, one humanity" would be CBB's testimony to the fact that listening to and embracing people of many faiths were necessary values that continue to be relevant to our society. It is good for America and the religions that call America "home!"

CBB leaders met with legislators in several states to speak about the importance of securing the diversity of religious expression and pluralism issues in those states. Various media covered the unfolding story which included a many yards long banner of inter-religious blessings, signatures, and prayers spontaneously expressed and presented as a testimony of hope to national lawmakers. It included unforeseen exchanges with Islamic representatives from the Middle East touring the United States. The story included the many volunteers along the way inspired by the CBB hopeful vision, as well as the thirty two clergypersons of differing faiths who participated at local churches, mosques, and synagogues, colleges and universities, state houses and community centers, as well as the place of dreams and remembrance, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center.

It's been more than several years now since my wife and I took our elementary school age children on something that we called "a pilgrimage" to various American heritage sites often associated with our national ideals. We lived (even then) in Washington, DC so certainly we had a head start – the monuments, the White House, Capitol Hill, Mount Vernon, Arlington. That summer's journey went through Fort McHenry, Gettysburg, Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Valley Forge, coal mill villages of Eastern Pennsylvania, the Statue of

Liberty and Ellis Island, Old North Church and portions of the Freedom Trail in Boston, Lexington and Concord, Plymouth (Rock) and Walden Pond, and Salem. Perhaps this was too much civil religion, but one can list some of our national values when thinking about the locations – freedom, sacrifice and struggle, religious tolerance, unity and diversity, openness, opportunity, fairness, equity, individuality, justice, and citizenship to name a few. Our adult children still remember most of those locations and their inherent ideals.

A few years later, we took another and very different journey. That pilgrimage would have multiple destinations, too – Washington, DC and the Pentagon, Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. That pilgrimage also made lasting impressions. To struggle, advocate, and live out the ideals that are indeed exceptional – such as affirming and celebrating religious liberty, tolerance, and pluralism – is still needed as both a matter of our society’s memory and our collective destiny. That pilgrimage not only gives us the chance to grieve together, but also the opportunity to struggle in a common partnership and witness that there is always something better than hate, violence, and murder. There is a place and time called *shalom/salem*.

Groups such as CBB find themselves in the middle of that journey. It is a trip that recalls the precious memories of unique religious faiths, affirms the national purpose found in religious respect and openness, and contends that opportunities for inter-religious understanding are not “least common denominator experiences,” but rather signs of a gifted society where deepened and strengthened faith traditions are able to stand alongside each other’s most precious offerings in an embrace.

This is the journey that continues. The inter-faith pilgrimage on behalf of an exceptional national vision and narrative called religious pluralism and acceptance goes on. Clergy Beyond Borders is en-route but there is still plenty of space available. Inter-personal as well as public discoveries of infinite value are guaranteed on the partnership journey of “one humanity sharing one ark.”

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² Scott and Russell.

³ *Temple Shooting Dredges up memories of Long History of Bias Crimes against Sikhs*, August 6, 2012, www.CNN.com

⁴ *Wisconsin Shooting: Tragic Extensions of Everyday Hate Experienced by Sikhs in North America*, August 16, 2012, www.southasianpost.com

⁵ www.cair.org

⁶ www.adl.org

⁷ <http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/crimnet/ojsa/hate-crime-in-nys-2010-annual-report.pdf>