

Three Amigos: After 9/11: An Interfaith Answer to Extremism



By Rabbi Ted Falcon, Pastor Don Mackenzie, and Imam Jamal Rahman, known collectively as the "[Interfaith Amigos](#)," who have been learning and teaching together since 2001. They blog for YES! Magazine. 9 Sept 2011

Most of us remember all too clearly exactly what we were doing on the morning of September 11, 2001. We remember because those hours changed us forever.

Along with the shock, the pain, the fear, and the grief, we remember an incredible outpouring of compassion. In our city of Seattle, as in so many other cities, people gathered spontaneously, creating monuments of flowers and cards. Each day, people came together to share and to comfort each other. And we remember the unprecedented international demonstrations of support, as sister monuments took shape in cities the world over. It appeared something deeply hopeful was being born.

But then we went to war, and bombs in Afghanistan silenced the voices urging dialogue to better understand what led to the attacks on us. In America, we found ourselves incredibly ignorant of the Muslim faith, but many of us suspected that the terrorists were not speaking the authentic teachings of Islam.

Soon after 9/11, we three—a pastor, a rabbi, and an imam—began to work together in order to understand. Rabbi Ted called Imam Jamal to join him at Shabbat worship the week of 9/11, and the two have taught and worshipped together ever since. Pastor Don helped plan and hosted a program for the first anniversary of 9/11, after which the three of us met at least once a week through the years. We hosted a year-long weekly Interfaith Talk Radio show in Seattle, led two trips to the Middle East, and have done well over a hundred programs together in this country as well as in Israel-Palestine, Japan, and Canada.

We soon realized there were dangerous mischaracterizations not only of Islam, but also of each of our faiths. We knew that there were truly spiritual resources within each of our traditions, but also that there were elements in each of our central texts that have been used to support the exclusivity that too often leads to violence in the name of religion.



Rabbi Ted Falcon:

9/11 demonstrated the shallowness of much past interfaith work: the West was quick to demonize not just the perpetrators of that stunningly criminal action, but also the whole of their faith.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each have core spiritual teachings against which all other aspects of those faiths must be measured. While each faith contains all of the core teachings, we found that Judaism emphasizes oneness, and the justice that follows from that oneness; Christianity emphasizes unconditional love, and the community that follows from that love; and Islam emphasizes compassion, and the compassionate action toward self and other that follows.

But we have also found major aspects of each faith that conflict with these core values. Religious institutions, to protect their influence, introduce dogma that too often eclipses central spiritual teachings—leading not toward compassion and oneness but toward exclusivity and the violence it engenders. Any interfaith dialogue that is to sustain us in times of crisis must confront these difficult areas within our own traditions.



Pastor Don Mackenzie:

Since 9/11, the most important thing I've learned has been the necessity for spiritual awareness as a prerequisite for translating spiritual teachings into action. By spiritual awareness, I mean a condition made possible by intentional practices (such as prayer, meditation, and fasting) where the individual self is seen as clearly as possible as a contributing partner to the greater whole of creation. These practices can be rooted in any path that helps to provide purpose and meaning and contributes to the common good. Spiritual practices provide centeredness by helping each of us perceive our deeper being apart from the “doings” and the “havings” of the separate self.

In Christianity, the story of Jesus's time in the wilderness and the temptations of the devil preceding his public ministry of healing and challenge to the status quo (Luke 4:1-13) reflect this necessity. In that story the particulars are metaphors. The “devil” is the personification of the evil that can so easily fill the emptiness that comes when we are not intentional concerning our spiritual practices.

The moral issues facing us today are so great and complex that we cannot move forward effectively without doing this work that will help us to make the best choices and sustain our energy and hope.



Imam Jamal Rahman:

The ten years since 9/11 have been a story of lost opportunities and lapses into old patterns. We learn from history that we do not learn from history. But, I would like to focus on hope and vision, on the life-affirming consequences of interfaith relationships in our country.

9/11 laid bare the truth that religious literacy is critical in a multi-religious society. Some entered interfaith dialogue and collaboration with suspicion, but by using their own beings as living laboratories they came to a stunning realization: Interfaith is not about conversion but about completion, about becoming a more complete human being. By being open to the wisdom of other traditions, they deepened their roots in their own traditions.

This effect has led to a significant number of people declaring and practicing what I call a “major and a minor” faith tradition. Looking at an object from different angles gives one a clearer view. Practicing a major and minor creates friendships with the other, and this can lead to epiphanies. A retired missionary who had been sent to combat the “alarming” number of Islamic converts in Africa confided to me, “What a waste of time! I wish I had spent my time becoming more Christ-like and less Caesar-like.” This reminded me of my own spiritual teacher, who criticized Muslim zealots bent on converting others. Trying to impose our religion on another makes us like the well-meaning monkey who plucks a fish out of the water to save it from a watery grave!

From us all:

Our core teachings call us to a spirituality of inclusivity—a spirituality that supports us in walking oneness, love, and compassion into the world we share. In a world splintered by polarization, it is this very inclusive spirituality that we need if we are to bring true political, economic, and social healing to our world.



Rabbi Ted Falcon is the co-founder of [Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue](#) in Seattle, where he served as rabbi for sixteen years. Pastor Don Mackenzie retired in June of 2008 as minister and head of staff of [University Congregational United Church of Christ](#) in Seattle. Imam Jamal Rahman is co-founder and Muslim Sufi minister at [Interfaith Community Church](#) in Seattle and adjunct faculty at Seattle University. Together, they are the authors of [*Getting to the Heart of Interfaith: The Eye-Opening, Hope-Filled Friendship of a Rabbi, a Pastor, and a Sheikh.*](#)