

Remarks of Senator John Kerry

July 28, 2008

At the conference

**Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed: *Implications for
Christians and Muslims***

Yale University

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The American novelist Michael Chabon recently asked, “Is there anybody else who feels that it might be best if we just started the 21st century over again?”

As someone who narrowly lost the Presidency in 2004, I try not to worry about do-overs. But as a person of faith, it’s hard to avoid a sense of regret about all the ground we’ve lost in a few short years in our quest for interfaith tolerance and understanding.

We’ve barely broken the seal on the 21st century, but already it’s been marked not just by burning buildings and occupying armies and riots and roiling images of bloodshed and humiliation, but also by an even more widespread and dangerous worry—by a question you hear whispered and spoken quietly: What if we can’t live together? What if the gulfs that separate us are unbridgeable? Maybe we just need higher walls and fewer visas. Maybe coexistence is just too difficult.

While demagogues will play cynically to this pessimism, most leaders believe and talk otherwise. They believe we can, we must, and—God willing—we will find a way to live together better than we have. That’s why you’re here. You’ve placed yourselves among those looking to be on the right side of this debate—and now together we must put ourselves on the right side of history.

In a world where today a Catholic, a Protestant, a Russian Orthodox Christian, a Confucian ex-Communist, a Hindu, a Muslim, and many assume a Jewish finger sits on a nuclear button, it’s a delusion to think we can retreat to our safe spaces. Not when Christians, Hindus and Muslims number in the billions. Not when Islam is the second-largest faith in Europe and the third-largest in America. Not when people of all faiths are

migrating and mingling like never before. Gallup says there are 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide. The Vatican recently announced that there are now more Muslims than Catholics. The reality is that our faiths—and fates—are inextricably intertwined. The poet Auden said it best, “We must love one another or die.” It’s a delusion to think we have any choice but to find a way to live together.

The question of tolerance isn’t new and it’s not one Americans come to without our own experience. We’ve struggled with this since our founding, which has its roots in the search for religious freedom. The quest for religious truth and the challenge of peaceful coexistence are written into the fabric of our country and the history of the world and even into my own family DNA.

John Winthrop, my great-grandfather eight times over—meaning 10 generations ago—was the son of a lawyer born in England. His passionate faith and his disagreements with the Anglican Church inspired him to lead a ship full of religious dissidents across the Atlantic to America to seek freedom to worship. On the deck of the *Arabella*, he famously said: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

It wasn’t long before these religious dissidents—many of whom lived in the city of Salem, Massachusetts, which takes its name from *salaam* or *shalom*, “peace”—experienced their own religious strife. They accused women of witchcraft and burned them at the stake.

In this “city on a hill,” Winthrop clashed with a rogue preacher named Samuel Gorton. When Gorton compared Winthrop to Pontius Pilate and his followers to idol-worshippers and vipers, Winthrop responded by putting him in shackles and having him arrested. When Gorton refused to stop preaching, Winthrop expelled him into the wilderness.

More doctrinal differences, this time over relations between church and state, would soon exile Roger Williams from Massachusetts. Accused of “wanting to banish god from government,” Williams was threatened with deportation back to England. Instead, he left Boston, leading his flock wandering through forests for the winter until he emerged on a great bay and called it Providence, which is today the capital of the State of Rhode Island.

Then, a theologian named Thomas Hooker broke with Massachusetts leadership because he believed that all authority, in state or religion, must rest on popular consent. It wasn’t long before he left too, and founded Hartford, Connecticut with his congregation – the Capital of this very state.

Yet another pastor, John Davenport, called for his congregants to burn their rings, cloaks, wigs and other vain personal items in a large bonfire—along with religious books he considered to be wicked. What happened? You guessed it: he left town to found a colony in Connecticut—making him one of the first to forsake Cambridge Massachusetts for greener pastures right here in New Haven. Davenport College at this university is named after him.

Today these states and cities are all neighbors with more in common than could possibly separate us.

But these early disagreements—all among a group of Christians whose shared disagreements with the Anglican Church had led them to the New World in the first place—remind me of a joke a Jewish friend of mine used to tell:

A Jewish man, miraculously rescued after years stranded alone on a desert island—welcomes some news crews. He shows them a bucket and says, “This is how I got my rainwater.” He shows them his coconut tree, and walks them past a snake patch he learned to avoid. And then they arrive at a clearing, with two shining temples.

The man says, “These are my two synagogues.” And the reporters ask, “If you were here all alone, why did you build two synagogues?” And the man points to one and says, “This one, I go to every week.” And he points to the other one, with a look of disgust. “That one...I would never set foot in!”

So these are not new challenges. Every religion has a version of this joke because we all struggle with the divisiveness of religious differences—even small differences inside the same religion.

So this dialogue is critical. And the truth is, no faith arrives with clean hands. In Christianity we’ve had our own struggles, going back to the crusades—and some would say there are still crusades going on today!

America has experienced its share of religious disputes and religious cruelty. And yet, though we’re far from perfect, no place has ever welcomed so many different faiths to worship so freely.

There is Buddhist temples in the farmlands of Minnesota, Mosques in the cornfields of the Midwest, and Hindu temples in suburban Nashville, Tennessee. Ours is a country not only of white church steeples but of synagogues, of minarets of Muslim mosques, of golden domes and shikara

of Sikh temples; of monasteries, Buddhist as well as Catholic. “E Pluribus Unum,” “From Many, One, is our national creed.”

From many faiths, one shared country. That achievement rests on our solution to the age-old question: Who defines the truth in public space?

Our experiment has succeeded because we’ve allowed for different notions of truth in public life. Many believe that to do otherwise is to invite permanent war.

My pride in America’s successes is tempered by knowing that we are a long way from mutual understanding with the Muslim world today. One enormous problem in that effort is that we lack a forum to discuss these issues. Even among political leaders it happens far too rarely.

If you don’t engage, you can’t even find answers to the most basic, fundamental questions: Why do you wear the hijab? Why do you go to Mecca? What is jihad? The absence of dialogue costs all of us. We have major politicians who couldn’t tell you the difference between Shi’a and Sunni— so it’s no wonder that we attack a secular dictator in response to radical fundamentalist terrorists.

And shockingly, the vast majority of followers of these great faiths have very little understanding of our common ancestry—or even know that we all worship one god and the same god. and do so with a very similar sense of awe and wonder and total commitment.

As a Catholic American politician, I know enough about Islam to know that I don’t know enough about Islam—and when it comes to Islam, American politicians ought to do a lot more listening and maybe a little less talking.

I believe we have a duty to understand each other in the name of living peacefully. We have a duty to engage with each other. The Abrahamic faiths—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam-- have to find new meaning in the old notion of our shared descent. What really is our common inheritance? What does it mean to be brothers? Are we responsible for each other, or are the exhortations of the Koran, the Torah, and the Bible just words?

Ultimately, our sense of kinship has to rest on something more basic than our common ancestry: an acknowledgement of our shared humanity.

The good news I see is that, for all the challenges our differences present, all of the major religions do have a sense of universal values—a moral truth based on the dignity of all human beings.

Gandhi called the world's religions "beautiful flowers from the same garden." Every religion embraces a form of the Golden Rule, and the supreme importance of charity, compassion, and human improvement. When Jesus was asked "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law," he replied: first "you shall love the Lord your God" and second "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

The Talmud says that in Roman times, a nonbeliever approached the famous Rabbi Hillel and challenged him to teach the meaning of the Torah while standing on one leg. Holding up one foot, Hillel replied: "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to another. That is the whole of the Torah... the rest is commentary."

The Prophet Muhammad said, "not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself."

Buddhist scriptures teach us to "treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." Native American spirituality proclaims that "all things are our relatives; what we do to everything, we do to ourselves."

Anyone who adheres to these basic principles must acknowledge: the moral challenges we all face today are immense, but also shared. Billions of human beings live in poverty. People are struggling to feed their families from Port Au Prince to Dhaka. AIDS orphans are raising their younger siblings in shantytowns in South Africa. A planet is being ravaged and radically altered by the pollution we've created. And people in every corner of the world are living lives of violence and desperation.

We should think of our shared struggle in terms of these unmet challenges.

65% of the Middle East's population is under age 25. There's a 15% unemployment rate, half of which is comprised of youths between ages 15-24—and just to maintain this unacceptable status quo as the population grows, the region needs 80 million new jobs in the next 15 years.

Extremism and violent sectarianism often represent a human attempt to capitalize on the failures of governance and civil society. This applies to failed states like Afghanistan, where in the 1990s the Taliban arose to fill a chaotic vacuum, but also to many other places where the state, the society, and the religious order don't do enough to remedy unfairness, lack of education, or social alienation. I don't just mean a place like Sadr City in Baghdad—this is true of Cairo or even the desolate immigrant suburbs around Paris. Demagogues misappropriate and distort religion to drive a wedge and gain a foothold—and failed states, failed civil societies, and frankly corruption in governance empower them to do so.

The dialogue here must include ways in which we join to express a common moral responsibility to avoid that exploitation and find instead the governance that empowers people and liberates religion to live its true meaning.

Let me make something clear: in talking about our shared challenges, I don't seek to minimize the real differences between our religions. The specificity, the immediacy, the richness of each of our sacred texts, the greatness of our preferred theologians and thinkers—all are cheapened when dialogue tries to turn religion into some sort of undifferentiated feel-good mush. We don't need to do that in order to find tolerance and co-exist. Nor can we hope to remove any influence of faith from our public life. In fact, we shouldn't even try. If we're not shaped by our faith, then we don't have faith.

In fact, in all of this it's important to remember what faith is. Faith, to the person who has it, is truth. But in the end, faith is a belief beyond the evidence—or as some people say, in the evidence yet to come. Who pronounces the truth? In the end, God does—not us.

What separates our faiths are different beliefs about what is not shown but simply believed. Belief by Christians that Jesus is the Son of God; Belief by Catholics in the Holy Trinity—a notion which Muslims and some even some other Christians believe compromises the oneness of a monotheistic God; Belief by Muslims that Jesus was a great prophet who didn't complete his mission, requiring Mohammed and the teachings of the Koran; Belief by Muslims and Jews that Jesus was an important teacher but that God could never become human. Each religion believes its basic tenets are supported by fact: That Mohammed received the Koran; That crucifixion was observed and recorded; That Moses led the Jews to the promised land. While each rests on basic facts, it still takes a leap of faith to weave these facts together into a religious narrative.

Whatever our differences, among the monotheistic religions, we should be celebrating that we all believe in one God. All religions should be celebrating our agreement to put one thing above all else: worship. And at the same time, we must also welcome the secular among us to join in celebrating our common awe at the majestic fact of the universe we inhabit, however it may have originated.

We don't need to agree on everything to get along—instead, we need to ask ourselves tough questions about coexistence. I see at least two types of conversations to cultivate between the great Abrahamic faiths—and all

faiths. The first I would call traditional interfaith dialogue. The second is a search for how we might live together in some sort of peace and harmony that respects our differences while fashioning a common effort for human dignity. We cannot wait for the theological conversation to finish before we move to pressing political and social questions.

Somehow, we have to find a way to agree that faith may be worth dying for, but it cannot be worth killing for. We have to strive for a global ethic that allows each of our religious faiths to express themselves fully but also allows us to unite around common ethical ground.

My own faith, Roman Catholicism, has advanced a line of thinking that I believe can help structure this second conversation. For many years Catholics have spoken of the common good, not just for Catholics, not just for a single people, not just for this or that nation, but for all the earth's people: an international common good.

Vatican II, a crucial document in recent Catholic history, labels the common good "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment." These conditions include the right to fulfillment of material needs, a guarantee of fundamental freedoms, and the protection of relationships that are essential to participation in the life of society. These rights are bestowed on human beings by God and grounded in the nature and dignity of human persons. They are not created by society. Indeed society has a duty to secure and protect them.

Can our great faith traditions come together and forge a consensus on the conditions of life that will empower people to find their own fulfillment? It seems to me that we cannot move forward as a planet if we do not come to some rough consensus on what these broad rights are. Beyond that we must find ways to secure these goods for everyone on our planet while simultaneously discussing, arguing and sharing our particular understandings of God and God's call for how we are to live our lives.

There are many different ways that communities of faith and governments can contribute to nurturing this second conversation. There are profound gaps in the mutual understanding not only between the major faiths, but also between nations populated by these faiths. Governments possess resources to sponsor educational exchanges, to make it easier for students to study abroad, to create venues for mutual intellectual collaboration and exploration.

We must also recognize that dialogue is not enough. We must also learn to match it with action and treat each other with respect. Napoleon, for example, arrived in Egypt declaring his love and respect for the Muslim

religion, and even hinting that he himself was eager to become a Muslim. Then he pillaged the country. It's not enough to talk a good game—our actions must foster coexistence as well.

I believe our shared ethics must also expand to embrace a duty to engage, to learn from, and to at least try to understand one another. I've been thinking recently that along with the Hajj to Mecca there should be another pilgrimage somewhere else—Jeddah maybe—where people of all faiths could join together and pray—in their own ways—for the enduring health of our planet and its people.

All religions today include their moderate and extreme elements—those who value peaceful coexistence and those who don't. It's up to each of us to work within our faith communities and between them to push people toward expressing their beliefs in a manner compatible with a peaceful world.

Gandhi said: You must be the change you want to see in the world. We all want to see a great deal of change. Somewhere between religious war and religious harmony—the “love” that each of our faiths command—is tolerance, acceptance of others' freedom to believe. I am so impressed and so grateful to “A Common Word” for not merely longing for a better dialogue but for standing up and delivering one.

We have come together to make an honest effort at understanding. When you do so, whatever your faith, I believe you are doing God's work.

My ancestor, John Winthrop, saw his colony in Massachusetts as a “city on a hill”—an example to teach others how to live an ideal life. Today it is up to all of us to build a new kind of city on a hill: one that cannot be walled off, one where those who disagree are not locked in shackles or exiled into the wilderness. We still need to set an example for the world. We have a lesson to teach humanity. Only now, the lesson is this: “We must love one another or die.” We must learn how to love our faiths and live them side by side. In the 21st century, that will be our city on the hill. May god bless you all. Thank you.