

What Truth Can Set Us Free?

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1. I am honored to have the chance to speak to you today about a subject that is on the minds of people around the world.
2. How should people with sincerely held religious beliefs deal with those whose beliefs are fundamentally different from their own?
3. Our religious traditions have not prepared us to answer that question.
4. Harvey Cox, a long-time professor of divinity at Harvard, recently wrote: **“Jesus never met a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Muslim. He left no clear precedents for how to deal with people of other religions.”** Cox, *The Future of Faith* at 130.

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1. For thousands of years the response to people with different beliefs has too often been violence and killing.
2. Today, we are most aware of killings by Muslims.
3. But no religion has a monopoly on killing in the name of God.
4. Hitler claimed killing Jews was doing God’s will.
5. Hindus in India killed more than 1,000 Muslims in 2002 and thousands of Sikhs in 1984.
6. In 2013, Buddhists killed scores of Muslims in Burma.
6. Whether religious beliefs are the reasons for the killing or an easy excuse, religious violence depends on the notion that people can be defined by their beliefs.

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1. The late Christopher Hitchens, an avowed atheist, wrote: **“Religion poisons everything. As well as a menace to civilization, it has become a threat to human survival.”** Hitchens, *God is Not Great* at 25.
2. Hitchens was advocating that religious beliefs should disappear.
3. Religious beliefs are not going away – they are far too important in the lives of billions of people.

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1. What is needed is not for religion to go away, but for us to cultivate different understandings of people with different beliefs – ones like our children have.
2. When my wife Jen and I travel around the world, we try to make contact with the children that we see.
3. Children all over the world share something very important and instructive.
4. They do not hate or mistrust other people because of their religions.
5. Why do children, who are so loving and trusting of people of all religions and cultures, grow up to fear and even hate those with different beliefs?

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1. The answer is simple – because that is what we teach them.
2. These are the lyrics from “*You have to be taught*” from Rogers and Hammerstein’s “*South Pacific*”:

**You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught**

**You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught**

**You've got to be taught before it's too late
Before you are 6 or 7 or 8
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught**

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1. Getting rid of the views that we pass on to our children, perhaps unconsciously, does not require that we ignore important differences in people’s beliefs.
2. We cannot tell our children that all religions are basically the same or we all worship the same God.
3. Because, as comforting as that idea may be, it is not true.

4. Many of the core beliefs of the world's great religions simply **“cannot be reconciled.”** Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 161.
5. There is an irreconcilable difference between the Buddhist belief there is no God and the claims of other religions that an all-powerful God looks after us.
6. There is an irreconcilable difference between the Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God and the view of Muslims and Jews that a transcendent God could not possibly have a son.

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1. Getting rid of the fear that we teach our children requires that we try to see people with irreconcilably different beliefs in the same way we see language differences.
2. Many of you have seen posters in airports around the world writing the word “welcome” in many languages.
3. We don't ask which one of these ways of saying “welcome” is true or how God says “welcome.”
4. We recognize that the language people speak indicates only where they were born and says nothing about their basic humanity.

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1. Like our languages, our religious beliefs are also **“largely a matter of the circumstances of [our] birth and upbringing.”** Cox, *The Future of Faith* at 38.
2. If we had been born to Egyptian parents, we would probably be Muslims.

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1. Just as our inherited language seems natural to us, so do our inherited religious beliefs.
2. The other day I saw a pick-up truck with a bumper sticker — “Covered in the blood of Jesus.”
3. Imagine explaining that statement to a Hindu who refuses to eat meat because it involves killing.

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1. When Christians recite the Christmas story from *Luke*, they never see the sexual imagery that Jews and Muslims see in the angel's statement that the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary and overshadow her, thereby making Jesus the Son of God.

2. Like our language, our understanding and acceptance of religious truth depends on where we were born.
3. Any God worth the name must have intended that.
4. The Dalai Lama, born Buddhist, writes: **“[I]f one believes that the entire cosmos, including all sentient beings within it, is a creation of one all-powerful and compassionate God, the inescapable consequence is that the existence of faith traditions other than one’s own are also God’s creation.”** Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 159.

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1. The idea that truth about the divine can differ based on where we were born is hard for many of us to accept.
2. A recent book by David Limbaugh contains the following quotation: **“Other religions have not provided the answer [to human needs.] It can only be found in the one true religion – Christianity.”**
3. Think about that statement – Christianity is the only religion that can satisfy the needs of humanity because it is the only true religion.
4. I think my 96 year-old father probably believes that.
5. When I showed him my pictures of Syrian Muslims, he was surprised that they were all smiling.

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1. Anyone who has traveled to places around the world where people are not Christian knows that that Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims and Jews and on and on are as comforted by their beliefs as Christians are by ours, maybe more so.
2. Even though the divine may have spoken to them differently, it has spoken to them in a way that satisfies them even if it may not satisfy us.
3. Huston Smith, who has written about all the world’s great religions, says: **“[F]or God to be heard and understood divine revelations would have to be couched in the idioms of its respective hearers.”** Smith, *The World’s Religions* at 386.

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1. And those revelations are limited by human understanding.
2. As Michael Novak, a Christian theologian, writes: **“The atheist does not see God—but neither does the believer. If there is a God such as Jews and Christians and many deists have held there to be, such a God cannot be reached by eyes, ears,**

taste, touch, or scent. Not by imagination or memory either. * * * Direct empirical knowledge of God could only be of a false God.” Novac, *No One Sees God* at 274.

3. Because everyone’s view of the divine is confined by the limits of human understanding and the place of their birth, those views may all be true even though they are irreconcilably different.
4. Science can prove the truth of that seemingly impossible statement.

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1. From the *Upanishads* to the teaching of the Buddha to the Bible to the *Quran*, religions around the world have equated their image of the divine with light, something that we see every day.
2. Scientists studying light have discovered something startling.
3. Sometimes light looks to us like a wave – other times it looks to us like a particle.
4. The observations are contradictory.
5. As Albert Einstein said: **"It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality."**
6. The light that we *can* see presents itself to us in contradictory ways that, within the limits of our understanding, are both true.
7. Surely we can learn to respect more than one image of the divine that we *cannot* see.

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1. It will take effort to discover the essential humanity of all people that sets us free from fear and hate because of what they believe and not who they are.
2. We have to follow the best traditions of our faiths and interact with the people we have been conditioned to fear.
3. We can eat and drink with people of other faith traditions.

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1. We can go to others’ places of worship.
2. We can become aware of the sacred literature of other faiths.
3. People have told me they refuse even to touch a Quran because they believe it is the work of the Devil.

4. But there is a lot in the Quran that everyone can agree with, including this: **“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)).”** Quran 49:13

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1. When we learn about images others have of the divine, we do not have to give up the image that we have found to be true.
2. Hinduism and Islam and Judaism won't rub off on us.
3. Perhaps, like learning another language sometimes helps us understand English better, learning about the beliefs of others will help us better understand our own beliefs.
4. Most important, interacting with those holding different beliefs can eliminate the fear and even hate that comes from the unknown.

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1. I know that is true.
2. In 2007, when my wife and I got on an Egypt Air plane in New York for the flight to Cairo, Jen admitted that she was uneasy.
3. All of the media reports of 9/11 focusing on the religion of the hijackers had made her afraid of the people on the plane because of how they looked.
4. But we went and we interacted with the people of Egypt whose beliefs are different from our own.
5. The trip changed our lives.

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1. It led me to study the world's religions and to teach people about them so they will not fear them.
2. It led to my involvement in creating the Center for Interfaith Cooperation.
3. We are thrilled that Rev. Zinke is on our Board of Directors and I am thrilled to be able to let you in early on something that is very exciting to us.
4. The Center for Interfaith Cooperation has been selected to join with the Indiana Buddhist Center in presenting a very special event at the Fairgrounds Coliseum on Saturday, June 25.
5. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, will speak publicly about compassion and the road to peace.

6. I hope you will all join us, beginning at noon.

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1. *Philippians 4:7* speaks of the peace that passeth understanding.
2. Helen Keller once said that she would rather have an understanding that passeth peace.
3. That is the premise of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, which articulates a vision of **“a community that pursues peace through interfaith understanding and cooperation.”**
4. Helen Keller was right – understanding those with different beliefs *is* the key to peace.
5. *That* is the truth that can set us free.