



Coexist!
Presentation at PMC Board Meeting
Rev. Kristi Denham
May 9, 2016

The “Coexist” Banner has been hanging in our sanctuary since the beginning of Lent. Several folks have asked me what all the symbols mean and today we will explore their meaning and ask ourselves if we really can coexist with the wide diversity of faiths in our world. Jesus prayer “That they may all be one” is on our United Church of Christ logo. We certainly can’t create a world where all are Christians, but perhaps if we learn to honor one another we can create a peaceful world!

First let’s just give names and meanings, to each of the images:

The large images at the center of the banner, the “C” of Coexist is created with the crescent moon and star of Islam. The new moon is an important guide in Islam. They follow a unique 12 month, 29 day calendar very different from ours but the moon is central to their sacred life. The image may have its origins with the Ottoman Turks, the first major Islamic state, who adopted it in the 14th Century.

The hand symbol with a wheel on the palm represents Jainism. It symbolizes the Vow of Ahimsa, or non-violence. Jainism emerged in 6th-century BCE India, the same time Buddhism was developing. It teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to live a life of harmlessness and renunciation.

Next comes the symbol for Gender Equality which is not a religious symbol so much as a values commitment to inclusivity which we in the UCC deeply share, especially now that some states are enacting laws to discriminate against the LBGTQ community.

Then we see Judaism's Star of David which has ancient roots but has been marred by its use during World War II by the Nazis.

The Universal Peace Symbol, also not so much religious as essential to all religions, was designed in 1958 for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). It superimposed the semaphore letters for "N" and "D" over each other.

The Yin Yang Symbol of Taoism is used by many faith traditions. Taoism is a philosophical tradition of Chinese origin that emphasizes living in harmony with life. The term Tao means "way", "path", or "principle" and the image represents balance and wholeness.

Finally, the "T" on "Coexist" is created by the traditional cross of Christianity. Originally an image of death and sacrifice, some have suggested it should be replaced by a hypodermic needle as that is how we kill people today. But it also means the tree of life and the intersection of heaven and earth – incarnation, so I vote we keep it!

Now we'll look at the smaller images on the top row:

First we have the Fish of early Christianity still seen on bumper stickers (without the legs that stand for Darwinism)! The word Fish in Greek is "ichthys" and the first letters of "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior" are in that word. It may have been used as a secret symbol to identify friends in the early days of persecution.

The Ankh, symbol for Life in Egyptian Hieroglyphics goes back some 7000 years.

The Hand of God -- a Germanic nature symbol, is often simply referred to as a symbol of Paganism. But Pagan is Latin for country folk and came to be applied to anyone who wasn't Christian.

Then we have the lovely human figure which is a symbol for Humanism, a system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize human needs, and seek rational ways of solving human problems. One of my friends found a Humanism group here on the Peninsula but they were mostly elderly folks. Humanism was established in the 19th Century.

Next we see a symbol for Hinduism, a major religion found most notably in India and Nepal. With approximately one billion followers, it is the world's third largest religion by population, and the majority religion in India, Nepal, and Indonesia. It has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings. It teaches that our beliefs determine our thoughts and attitudes about life, which in turn direct our actions. By our actions, we create our destiny. The Hindu temple in San Bruno welcomed a group of us to their celebration of Krishna's birthday. It was a colorful and warm experience where we were reminded that all of life can be experienced as sacred.

Then we see a five pointed star associated with Wicca, a creation of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom. Their goal was to "re-enchant the world," and was a reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the continuing alienation of humans from the natural world; Wicca, witch, wisdom, and weird all come from the same English root!

Buddhism's Dharma wheel reminds us that what goes round comes round until we step off the cyclic wheel of multiple lifetimes through meditation and compassionate action. Founded by Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in Nepal during the 5th century BCE it is a powerful religious tradition based on practice rather than beliefs.

The last figure at the top right may be a phoenix but might also be the eagle of Native American Spirituality. The Eagle is a symbol of Great Spirit and leadership. Eagle feathers have been worn by chiefs and given as symbols of wisdom and right action.

Now let's look at the images on the bottom of the banner:

Buddhism's Lotus flower carrying a flame-shaped white 'Atman' reminds Buddhists that we grow up through the mud of life (as lotus flowers have their roots in muddy waters. The flowers are pure and beautiful and remind practitioners of enlightenment. The flame represents the "soul" or "self".

The Unicursal Hexagram is a hexagram that can be drawn in one continuous line rather than by two overlaid triangles. In both Greek and Hindu mythologies, it is a symbol of dedication to divine beings.

A simplified version of the Buddhist Dharma Wheel is next, followed by Wicca's Triple Moon Goddess, representing the phases of the moon as well as the Maiden/Mother/Crone, It symbolizes the wisdom in the natural flow of life.

The next symbol represents Sikhism, founded in the 15th Century with followers mainly in India and Pakistan. The principal belief of Sikhism is faith in a Universal God and followers tend to be respectful of all religions. There is a beautiful Sikh temple in San Jose that our interfaith group visited and experienced a truly warm welcome.

The Menorah of Judaism is described in the Bible and used in the portable sanctuary set up by Moses in the wilderness and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. It is the emblem on the coat of arms of the modern state of Israel.

The Torii Symbol is a traditional Japanese gate that represents Shintoism. It marks the transition from the profane to the sacred. Shintoism is an overall perspective more than a list of beliefs and is a uniquely Japanese way of seeing the world and its beauty that contains many nuances. It includes aesthetic sensitivity, a sense of beauty, seeing with the heart into the natural beauty and goodness of all things.

Finally, we have the symbol for Unitarian Universalists, the flame of the Spirit carried within Universal Oneness. Unitarians founded in America when they broke away from Trinitarian Congregational church. Unitarians united with Universalists in 1961 and is a theologically diverse religion that encourages people to seek their own spiritual path.

Rev. Jim Burklo, the former pastor of the College Heights UCC, and currently Associate Dean of the Office of Religious Life at University of Southern California, offers several principles for interfaith engagement, some of which I'll remind us of here:

The world's religions are different from each other. They are many paths up many different mountains, rather than just one mountain. When you get to the top of any of the mountains, you can admire a beautiful mountain range and the magnificent view. And as one of my colleagues suggests, we are called to work together in the valley!

We do best to remember that lurking even in the similarities there may be really interesting differences. Judaism is quite different than Christianity. For one thing, Judaism has an intrinsic ethnic identity that Christianity lacks. For many, religion is defined first and foremost by belief. But many faiths are defined more by rituals and practices than by doctrinal assertions.

There are different ways of understanding religious differences. Pluralism is the idea that other religions may be as good for others as mine is for me. This is the Progressive Christian stance!

Inclusivism is the assumption that other religions may have truth and value worthy of engaging, but is but a lesser reflection of the ultimate, authoritative good of my own tradition.

Exclusivism is the assumption that other religions are wrong at best and evil at worst, and that my faith is the only true one.

We can have close working relationships and even deep friendships between people who hold exclusivist views within their different faiths.

It's good to know something about the world's religions: at least enough to know just how much you don't know! We need curiosity and humility. There is always more to know that could affect our relationships with people of other faiths. Ask questions, and then ask more questions

We need to make room for overt atheists, too. There is plenty of judgment and condemnation in the wider world that we need to be sure to avoid. You can grow in your own faith tradition through deep exposure to other traditions.

One reason to get involved in interfaith work is to look more critically at your own faith, take it more seriously, and become more curious about it. Learning and practicing Buddhist meditation has led me to explore the rich meditative and contemplative mystical traditions of my Christian heritage.

The United Church of Christ has long supported Interfaith Dialogue. In 1987 and 1989, General Synod adopted resolutions reinforcing our commitment to reconciliation with the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Our NCNC Conference is hosting a workshop on Interfaith at the next Annual Gathering and I'll be helping to lead it along with Rev. Paul Chaffee who founded the Bay Area Interfaith Center at the Presidio.

The Peninsula Multifaith Coalition has created many ways for us to learn about each other and grow in our faith. As a consequence, there are stronger relationships of trust and respect among diverse people here than in any other part of the Bay Area. We are learning to love the stranger in our midst and beyond our doors. Jesus said to "Love your neighbor...and even your enemies!" We are learning that many former strangers can be friends!