

Religious Diversity

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Pastor James

Senior Pastor, Community Church in Fairfield Glade, TN

Where I grew up around Corpus Christi, Texas, most folks were either Catholic or Baptist. **And the only non-Christian religion that I had ever seen growing up was a very small Jewish synagogue.** It wasn't until I became a chaplain in the United States Air Force that I was exposed to and interacted with an amazing diversity of religions and Christian denominations.

But actually it was not so much religions that I encountered as it was religious people. As bestselling author Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her book, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, **"There is no such thing as religion. There are only religious people."** I have met a beautiful diversity of religious people along the journey of life, which has enriched my own religious experience as a devout follower of Jesus Christ.

While in the Air Force stationed in South Dakota, I discovered the beauty and wisdom of **Native American religious people.** One of my most memorable experiences was visiting Bear Butte, a mountain sacred to many American Indian tribes who go there to hold religious ceremonies. **Many American Indians see Bear Butte as a place where the Creator has chosen to communicate with them through visions and prayer.**

During my visits there, I saw spread across the mountainside colorful pieces of cloth and small bundles or pouches hanging from the trees. They represented the prayers offered **by individuals during their worship.** My own prayer life and worship was deepened by such sacred encounters on that mountain of prayer in South Dakota.

During the first week of December 2002, I left my family behind in South Dakota while I deployed to the Middle East, remaining there the first part of 2003 during the initial stage **of the Iraqi War.** Within the midst of a combat environment, I once again encountered religious people.

Near our "tent city" in the desert was a British ally air base. Having befriended the British chaplain, my counterpart, I asked him to be a guest preacher one weekend in our U.S. chapel. Little did I know that this religious leader in the Church of England would sprinkle in just enough distinctly British lingo in his sermon to make it difficult to understand for us **American Christians.** I should have known this could happen

considering my previous years serving in congregations in south Texas in which I preached in Spanish just as often as in English.

Even within one religious group of people, in this case Christianity, there is a diversity of languages, rituals, practices, and beliefs. This holds true, in fact, with all groups of religious people. Brown Taylor goes further in explaining the pervasiveness of diversity among religious people: “What this means is that it is not possible for a generic group of Christians to meet with a generic group of Buddhists to discuss a generic issue on which they differ. If you have met one Buddhist, you have met exactly one—and the same is true of the followers of other faiths as well. Although we may all be tuned to the singular teachings of our distinct religions, our religious experience is not singular but plural. This is true within our religions as it is between them.”

I cannot speak for all Christians, just as one Buddhist cannot speak for all Buddhists, nor one Muslim speak for all Muslims.

We can, however, as individual religious people, build helpful and peaceful relationships that may build bridges between religious groups. This happened to me in a remote middle eastern desert.

Besides a neighboring British air base next to our U.S. air base in the desert, we also had a host nation air base nearby. In fact, we were close enough that some of our U.S. operations were apparently interfering with the prayer times at the mosque that was located on our host nation’s air base.

Thankfully, I had befriended an Arabic translator who worked for the U.S. military and also happened to be a Sudanese Muslim. He regularly attended the mosque on the host nation’s air base since our U.S. base didn’t have that particular religious resource.

Through the relationship with my friend the Sudanese Muslim, our two air bases were able to coordinate activities to mitigate interfering with prayers in the mosque, which went a long way towards building bridges between two very distinct religious groups.

In my next assignment after South Dakota, I went to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, where I actually had the opportunity and blessing to be a member of the most religiously diverse team I had ever experienced.

In addition to a Muslim U.S. Air Force chaplain, our chapel team also included a Rabbi chaplain as well as religious leaders from Wiccans, Mormons, Eastern Orthodox, **Buddhists, Hindus, and many more.** We were the epitome of religious diversity.

This may surprise you, but it shouldn’t. **U.S. military service members** are a reflection of our nation’s population. **The U.S. is a diverse country, including religiously.** While the majority of Americans are Christian, our nation is founded on the freedom of religion, highlighted in the First Amendment of the Constitution: “Congress shall make no law

respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." **The** First Amendment applies not just to Christians, but to all religious people of any religion.

I'm extremely grateful that I live in a country where religious diversity can be learned, **respected, honored, and celebrated.** My own Christian religious experience is strengthened because of it.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

Pastor James