

# Three Faiths, One God: Interfaith Dialogue – Christianity, Islam and Judaism

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
On December 17, 2008 by

The Right Reverend Alexei R. Smith  
Imam Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi  
Rabbi Mark S. Diamond

## **The Right Reverend Alexei R. Smith**

I was given the task of trying to explain to you how the Catholic Church instructs our people in inter-religious tolerance. Well, I would simply answer: we don't. We don't because we don't use the word "tolerance." Tolerance for us is a negative term – it means "to put up with," and we're not interested in merely putting up with other faiths, we're interested in allowing ourselves to be enriched by other faiths, and grow in appreciation of one another. You may be familiar with a new book out on inter-religious faith and dialogue entitled *Beyond Tolerance*, written by a friend of mine, Professor Richard Niebuhr from Syracuse University.

In explaining the title he says that religions must move beyond the idea of just tolerating one another; because tolerance doesn't break down barriers, it doesn't break down stereotypical images we have of others and it doesn't put a face on religion. And that's the purpose – at least in my mind – of these religious dialogues is to put a face on religion, and from my interactions, certainly with my distinguished colleagues here today, that we have put a face on Judaism and certainly on Islam.

What we do in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles is that we try to uphold a conservative document from the Second Vatican Council called *Nostra Aetate*. You're probably familiar that the Catholic Church up until the Second Vatican Council, which took place in the early '60s, was really not interested in interacting with men and women of the other Christian faiths, let alone non-Christian faiths. But, the Second Vatican Council changed all of that for us and if you look at the decree *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration for the Church's relationship to non-Christian faiths, it spells out exactly how we are to interact with Jews, with Muslims, with Hindus and with Buddhists.

If that Council were held today we'd have a whole other list of religions that would be included there but, those were the major ones that the Council dealt with. And that Council encouraged that – to engage in dialogue, it encouraged us to respect other religions and this was, to the Catholic Church, a very startling statement. The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from our own teachings, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.

Yet she proclaims – and is duty bound to proclaim without fail – Christ. The Church, therefore, urges – a powerful word *urges* – her sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion in collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians. Also, their social life and their culture. Now that was revolutionary – absolutely startling. And although this document is some forty years old now, it was a long time taking root. So I’m not going to sit here tonight and tell you that everything is rosy. But at least it’s the foundational document of what we try to do at least here in the Archdiocese.

I am often asked if this is universally the view of the Catholic Church around the world, and our view is, yes. But I would have to admit that not every archdiocese throughout the world has implemented this document to the extent that we certainly have in the United States, and very particularly here in Los Angeles. How do we do that? Well, we do that in a number of ways and I will limit my remarks here tonight to how we interact with Muslim and Jews. We do this in a number of ways. We have bilateral dialogues; theological dialogues; priest-rabbi dialogues; Catholic-Jewish women’s dialogues; Muslim-Catholic dialogues. My goal is to establish a Muslim-Catholic women’s dialogue. We have any number of interactions. We have exchanges. We have some pulpit exchanges where a rabbi or imam would come speak to our faithful at mass on Sunday and then the priest would in turn go to either the mosque or the synagogue on Friday or Saturday and speak to the congregations there.

We’ve had any number of interactions in our school system – we have an extensive school system here in Los Angeles. We partner with a number of Jewish organizations to help our Catholic students grow in appreciation of Judaism. We partner with members of the JDL, some of whom I see here this evening, and we’re doing a witness program where we immerse our Catholic school teachers in holocaust studies and equip them to present the holocaust and combat anti-Semitism and anti-racism and anti all “isms” in our Catholic schools.

We partner with the American-Jewish committee, and the Jewish community is fine with a rabbi teaching in our Catholic schools, presenting to our Catholic students the fundamentals of Judaism. I, myself, have arranged a number of visits of Muslim imams and scholars to our various classrooms. I see another friend here, Dr. Siddiqi. He and I have partnered a number of times in coming to a number of our parishes to present Islam to our Catholic people. People I think are thirsty for this type of one-on-one interaction. It’s a marvelous thing to watch our kids interact with people like the two gentlemen sitting next to me here. We do some inter-faith services on our Catholic school campuses; the younger the child the more enthralled they are to see someone wearing this little hat, or to see someone wearing their flowing robe. They just cannot get enough of that. And it’s when you put a face on the religion that they can actually see: “Oh, wow. This guy’s a Muslim, this guy’s a Jew. Well wait a minute, they’re just like us.”

And that’s how we begin then to ingratiate and to encourage our people to hunger and thirst and strive for greater understanding and appreciation of the other. We’re taking full advantage, and I boldly say this tonight, that’s why we’re taking full advantage of the Skirball Center’s wonderful exhibit they’re having there now in Los Angeles, *A Blessing to One Another – Pope John Paul II and the Jewish People*. I find myself as an honorary docent there. Just this afternoon I gave two tours at the exhibit – one to a mixed group of Catholics and Jews and another to Jewish congregants at one of your synagogues rabbi, Temple Menorah in Redondo Beach. And again the more we allow ourselves to interact with the other the better we are. I delight in taking field trips with our Catholic people; I love to visit the different houses of worship. Most of our people,

especially the older people, were raised very narrowly. We didn't enter non-Catholic houses of worship. I delight now as I have what I affectionately call "Father Alexei's Bus Tours." We go all over the place. We go to temples and to mosques and Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines and all of these things. It's just amazing if you allow people to put a face on the other religions.

One of the things I really like doing every year – and I make a point of doing this every year – is that I participate in what is termed a "Ten Commandment Hike." This is sponsored by the Boy and Girl Scouts. They visit ten different houses of worship and at each house of worship they not only learn about that particular faith's traditions, but they also study one of the Ten Commandments. Last year we started at a Jewish synagogue where the scouts were predominantly Christian, although the demographics are changing, and were instructed in the First Commandment by a Muslim. Only in L.A.; only in L.A. would this have happened. So, we have to take advantage of this great literacy and celebrate it.

So, these are some of the ways in which we try to invest this document. I'll close with this reflection. You may have seen across the street from the Greek Orthodox Cathedral there's a wonderful painting of two angels, each with one wing. The depiction caption under that painting is simply this: "We are each of us an angel with one wing. We need the other in order to fly." And so the two angels are embraced with one another. That's a wonderful blessing for interfaith activities here in Los Angeles. Catholics need Muslims, need Jews, need Hindus, need everyone else in order to fly and to celebrate the life that we live here in L.A. Thank you.

**Imam Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi**

Good evening. I am from the Islamic Society of Orange County and also I'm the Chairman of the Shura Council of Southern California which represents seventy Islamic centers and mosques and Islamic organizations in Southern California. Also I am a member of the Islamic Society of North America and the Islamic Law Council of North America. I would like to mention from all four of these organizations what we are doing in our interfaith work, and what we do in society both at the local level as well as on the regional level here in Southern California, and as well as on the national level.

As far as Islamic faith in Orange County is concerned, we are very much involved in interfaith dialogue. We have programs in which we work together with our Jewish friends as well as our Christian friends and we have a program of two weeks of visits with our religious friends. So, Christians, Jews and Muslims visited a Jewish temple and last week we had a discussion and meeting together, and then after that we observed a prayer. Then after that we invited everybody back to the mosque and we did the same thing – one week for discussion and meal and ended the week also with a prayer, and knowing something about Islamic worship.

We did the same thing with the Christian community, for this kind of interfaith activity going on. Myself and the Rabbi, we also had a course at the Islamic site in Orange County, a four-day course on understanding the prophet in Judaism and prophets in Islam. So this is very important work of understanding and building relations. We also worked on twining of the Jewish community and the mosque and working together against "Islamophobia" as well as anti-Semitism.

We have a continuing dialogue with our Catholic friends and for meetings we have, and this has been going on here in Orange County in the western region. As has the Shura Council of Southern California, the Shura Council is the organization of about one-half million Muslims living in Southern California. As for the greater organization, we have in society very much

interfaith relations, and we have worked closely with friends Alexei Smith and other Jewish friends on this level.

The Islamic society of North America has been deeply involved with interfaith work, and recently established a special office in Washington. This office has been working on communication with the Christian community as well as the Jewish community. And our dialogue especially with the Jewish community has increased. We have established a whole course – a ten-week course of study – between Jews and Muslims, exploring various aspects of Judaism and Islam.

These kinds of activity are going on because we believe very much that Islam, Judaism and Christianity are family religions. We have a lot of things in common. We emphasize our tradition when the Qur'an says that Judaism and Christianity are religions of the book, and therefore *Ahl al-Kitāb*, the people of the book. That means there are a lot of commonalities, and commonalities have to be emphasized. Yes there are differences; differences to be respected. It doesn't mean that we agree with everything, but at the same time we can work together. We have to emphasize how we can work together.

Islam, though you may not know, Islam is a religion of unity. It emphasizes very much a unity of God and a unity of the community. But Islam also appreciates the diversity. The Qur'an speaks that God has created this universe of diversity. There's diversity in nature: different colors in the mountains; different colors in the flowers. The whole universe is full of diversity. And in a similar way, the Qur'an says that God has created human beings with diversity.

Human beings have different races and colors and personalities and genders. Besides this natural diversity, there is also a diversity of viewpoint; a diversity of viewpoint and ideas. Not all views are equal. Not all views are correct. Some views are correct, some views are not correct. But then, the Qur'an also says that it is God's will that people have different views.

In one place it is mentioned in the Qur'an that if God had willed, he would have made all of you think in the same way. But he did not want it. He wanted to test you, in your views; in your deliberations, and then after that, see who is doing the best work. So all of you have to do your best; you try to do your best, and in the end God is the judge.

It is very important to have interfaith relations; interfaith dialogue, and peaceful relations. Peace and harmony can come when we respect other people's views, and we recognize that all human beings are from the same family. This is the family of Adam and Eve. God has given it that all people are from one family. But then this family is of different views. It's a family of different races; a family of different colors, and all of them have to respect and live with each other in peace and harmony.

This is the message of Islam. This is what we emphasize, and this is what we support. Yes, unfortunately there are people who abuse Islamic teachings, misrepresent Islam by their behavior, and our organization has spoken very strongly against that. The Islamic Law Council of North America issued a very strong *fatwa* – religious opinion – against terrorism. And we said that all acts of terrorism are forbidden in Islam. It is forbidden to support acts of terrorism. It is also required that if you see someone involved in an act of terrorism you should inform the authorities in order to protect the people.

This is the statement issued several years ago on the national level, and it was repeated again last year. This is our position in the matter of relationships and also our condemnation of violence;

our condemnation of terrorism. And at the same time we want to see how we can build relations with the people. Unfortunately, there's a lot of misunderstanding about Islam; lack of knowledge about Islam. We would like to see the people understand the religion – understand its methods. It is a religion like Judaism; like Christianity.

We believe in the same God, whether you call him Elohim or Allah or Elohe, coming from the same semantic root. We believe in the same prophets. The majority of the prophets that we believe are those of the biblical prophets. In the Qur'an, twenty-five prophets are mentioned by name. Twenty-three of them are mentioned in the Bible. Only two prophets were not mentioned in the Bible. They are prophets related in the Arabian tradition. But there are twenty-five in Muhammad; twenty-three biblical prophets.

Our stories are very similar. Our ethical and moral teachings are the very same. The Ten Commandments that were spoken, Muslims agree with the Ten Commandments. Of the 613 Mitzvot, I one time sat down and said let's study all of them and see how many I agree with almost all of them, except for those that were ritual acts and ritual practices and ritual observances, and some of the rules relating to bris and others. Apart from that, as far as moral and ethical teachings are concerned, there's a lot of similarity.

The Sermon on the Mount, the Qur'anic teachings that you have in various chapters of the Qur'an, they are very common. And these commonalities are not understood. They're not understood by many people. Even some Muslims do not know this. That's why it is very important to have interactions and relationships. The more relationships we have, the more interaction we'll have, the more we'll have peace and cooperation with each other.

So I appreciate very much this opportunity to sit together and talk about what we teach. Our teaching is that God sent his many prophets to humanity. And his prophetic teachings are there in the gospels; prophetic teachings are there in the Torah. That does not mean that we agree with everything. Then we'd be one religion. There are three religions and three different positions. And then within each religion there are also different interpretations. So we emphasize intra-faith dialogue as well as interfaith dialogue.

We issued a very strong statement regarding relationships between Sunni and Shia; how we can work together. And this was issued here in Southern California and was signed by Muslims all over North America. We also issued a special court of ethics of working between Muslims and Jews, and it was signed here in Southern California and accepted many other places.

We have great cooperation and collaborations with our Catholic friends and other Christian communities. So this is the level of work that is going on. There are challenges. There are difficulties. There are misunderstandings. And we all need to support each other and work together. Thank you.

### **Rabbi Mark S. Diamond**

I want to briefly dedicate my remarks to a beloved teacher and friend, Rabbi David Lieber, who passed away this week and his funeral, is tomorrow. David was, as many of you know, the President Emeritus of the American Jewish University, a great rabbi, scholar, teacher and mentor and as we say in our tradition a mensch, a very decent human being – one of God's precious children – and I dedicate my remarks to him and pray that his memory will be a blessing.

Friends, in this season of miracles, I will try to achieve a minor miracle tonight and that is to be the first rabbi in history to limit his remarks to five minutes as I was requested to do. You can time me to see if I achieved that minor miracle. We were asked to comment on interfaith tolerance and I must tell you that my two least favorite words in both interfaith work and intrafaith work are “tolerance” and “dialogue” – two words I like the least in the work that we do are tolerance and dialogue. Tolerance, why? Because tolerance is nice but we need much more than tolerance. I would argue that we need in the work that we do five qualities – five things.

First, we need to get to know each other better; we need knowledge of one another and of the beliefs and practices of our neighbors. We live, as we know, in one of the most diverse communities on the face of this planet and yet I would argue that we are really many, many separate communities here in L.A. We don’t generally take the time, effort and energy to get to know each other. To take one example from this season of the year, I get so many questions about Hanukkah as the Jewish Christmas. Somebody asked me the other day if I give twenty presents to my children. It was bad enough when they thought it was eight presents, now it’s up to twenty. I’ve been working hard to train our kids to get one present, let alone eight; let alone twenty. Hanukkah is a wonderful holiday – it is not a Jewish tradition equivalent to Christmas. So, we have to take the time to get to know each other better, to study and learn each other’s faiths and beliefs.

Second, we need understanding of one another. We need to dig deeper and to, for example, understand each other’s narratives and really take the time, I think, to work together to try to understand each other both of what unites us and in this case, as people of Abraham and Sarah, but also what divides us and where we do have genuine differences. We don’t do that enough.

Third, we need a hefty dose of respect to get to know each other, understand each other and respect one another’s beliefs and practices. I must tell you I come here tonight after five days of jury duty. I have to tell you a very quick true story about respect. I began this process last Wednesday at the courthouse on South Hope Street and was put in a pool of thirty jurors for a criminal case and like many of you, I was thinking, “Oh, my God. There’s so much going on I really don’t need this. I don’t have the time.”

When it came to questions of the jury that we were asked, and then we were allowed to do sidebar questions with the judge – the presiding judge. This was already Thursday, and he had announced that the trial would last for five days and because it had been moved over and the court’s calendar was quite crowded it would be 1:30 to 4:30 each afternoon and then a full day when we began deliberations. I passed him a note for a sidebar that I’d be honored to serve – I did believe that at the time – and it was my civic duty which I do take seriously. But I also said, “Your Honor, I have a religious problem. The Jewish Sabbath begins at 4:26 on Friday with the lighting of Sabbath candles; Shabbat candles.”

Many of you know that our Shabbat – our Sabbath – begins on Friday evenings. And I said, “I’d be honored to serve but I have this religious conflict. I have to leave here – and I’ve timed it – no later than 3:15 in order to make it to my home in the San Fernando Valley by 4:26.” He called me in privately to a sidebar and said, “If you are put on this jury, I will make sure that you’re out by 3:15.”

Lo and behold, potential jurors are dropping like flies. Yours truly is empanelled, the judge turns to the jury, we’re all sworn in, and he says, “I have some news to share with you. I have a cold, I haven’t been feeling well,” which I believed was true; after all he’s the judge. And he said,

“We’re going to have to adjourn on Friday, tomorrow, at 3:15.” So, I looked around the room, Friday in the middle of the second witness’ testimony and at 3:15 without even looking at the jurors “we are adjourned until Monday.”

I have to tell you that was probably the most touching part of jury service. What a great country we live in that a judge would accommodate and respect my religious practices. One postscript to the story – we spent two days of deliberations and finally yesterday in the later moments one of the jurors said to the group, “Why did we get out at 3:15? What’s going on with that judge?” I said, “Friends, I have a confession.” OK you guys got out at 3:15 on Friday which was great, thank you, Rabbi. People were so pleased. I’m explaining Judaism to them and they’re thinking, “Next trial, I want to be on with the Jews and get out early on Friday.

But, there is a serious point to this story. The judge had great respect and great accommodation. I could not have asked for anything more. I am very touched that this happened and I hope in the end my fellow jurors also had respect for my own beliefs and practices, as I had for theirs.

Fourth. We need more passion in our religious work. I must tell you that when we do interreligious work together I like to do that with people who are passionate about their faith; not people who are sort of lukewarm, wishy-washy about what they believe in. I think, genuine, religious, interreligious work is best done by people – clergy and non-clergy – who are serious, and committed and passionate and knowledgeable about their own faith traditions. These are the people who I think are best in this field and I would ask the question – I hope that we’ll explore it later – can I be passionate about my own faith as a Jew and leave room for others who are passionate about their own faith – Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, whatever?

And I will tell you that for me as an observant Jew, as a rabbi and as a Jew, the unequivocal answer is yes, yes. Absolutely, yes. In fact, I would argue that my Jewish faith is stronger and richer and deeper. With each interfaith experience I have I grow as a Jew and maybe we’ll come back to that a little bit later on in the Q&A.

Finally, I would ask that we need to have compassion. Passion is important in religion but we also need a very, very hefty dose of compassion. I would ask that we as people who are passionate about our faith translate that passion into compassion for others; compassion for all of God’s children. I believe what God asks of all of us and of all of you is to uplift the fallen; to heal the sick; to shelter the homeless; to feed the hungry. This is a sacred mandate we all face as children of God.

Very briefly, secondly, the other word I detest in interreligious work is “dialogue.” I’m sorry that was on the title for tonight’s panel. I am truly weary of interfaith dialogue. We need to reach deeper in our interfaith work. We need to do more than simply hold hands in a circle and sing Kumbaya. It’s lovely, it’s wonderful. We’re getting pretty good at it. We need to do more. In fact, we need to do more than just gather together as a community for happy occasions as well as sad occasions. I’ve been with my distinguished colleagues and others here in the room on many occasions. We do these interreligious thing whenever there’s a sad event; a tragic event in our world or in our community and we do it to celebrate happy occasions. That’s wonderful. We need to do that but we need to do more than that. We need to be getting together and getting to know each other throughout the year, not just at special occasions.

Very quickly, I’ll highlight and hopefully we can come back to this. Two of the programs we’re proudest of on the Board of Rabbis that both of these colleagues participated in. One is

“Troubling Traditions” wherein we had an intrafaith conference of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars and clergy to talk about not what bothers me the most about your faith, but what bothers me most about my own faith. What are the passages in Torah and in the rabbinic tradition that I am most troubled about – that hurt me, that cause me and might cause others offense?

It was a marvelous conference that brought together academics and clergy and in a public forum the community to reflect on what we can do ourselves within our own faith, and looking at expanding that. The other, and Father Alexei has traveled twice – and we’re very very pleased that in January of this year a group of twenty-three Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders traveled together for tens days to the Vatican, Rome and Israel. We had the great privilege of meeting His Holiness, the Pope. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to take a bit of Los Angeles to the Middle East; to the Holy Land, and for us to meet with religious leaders both at the Vatican and in Israel and Palestine, and to engage in very thoughtful discussions – I won’t say “dialogue” – and experiences and again maybe we can come back to them in the Q&A. Amazing experience! We learned from them even as I hope they learned a little bit from us.

Let me close with the following thought that we have to move beyond dialogue – to study, to prayer, to service. I’m mindful of a teaching in the Jewish tradition that there are three pillars of the world. In Hebrew they’re called *Torah*, *avodah* and *gemilut hasadim*, which I would translate here as learning, worship and acts of loving kindness. And I truly believe that we need to be living, learning, praying and working together as partners with God to heal our community, and to heal our world. Thank you.

[www.lawac.org](http://www.lawac.org)

Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content. The views expressed herein are not endorsed by the Council. The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.