

A case of mistaken identity: Children of one God

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

By now we are all too familiar not only with the major terrorist attacks on the World Trade towers and the Pentagon, but also with the smaller terrorist attacks on Muslims, Sikhs and Arab-Americans in the weeks since then. At the time of this writing, the murder of an Arizona Sikh man named Balbir Singh Sodhi is the latest deadly case of mistaken identity.

The events of the past two weeks have shown that many of us are mistaken about one another's identities—especially our religious identities—and that our ignorance is a luxury we can no longer afford. Ever since Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, the complexion of America has been rapidly changing. Between 1990 and 1999, the Asian population of the United States grew 43 percent to some 10.8 million people, while the Latino population grew 38.8 percent to 31.3 million, making it almost as large as the African-American population in this country. There are now some 6 million Muslim Americans, 4 million Buddhist Americans and 1 million Hindu Americans. By anyone's reckoning, the United States is no longer a Christian nation, nor even a Judeo-Christian nation. We are the most religiously diverse people on earth.

And yet how many of us know the difference between Sikhs and Muslims, or Sunnis and Shi'ites? How many know the difference between Pure Land Buddhism and Zen? If your child brings a Hindu playmate home for supper, do you know better than to serve hamburgers and beef-flavored fries? If a Japanese friend invites you to her Shinto wedding, do you know why you should not give her a set of black-and-white placemats and napkins?

Christians do not hold a monopoly on ignorance of other faiths, but their historical majority in the U.S. has lulled many into thinking that there is no more reason to learn about Islam than there is to learn to speak Arabic.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Americans have converted to Islam in recent decades, Vedanta societies have sprung up in Boston and Chicago as well as Portland and Atlanta, and the largest Buddhist temple in the Western Hemisphere is in Hacienda Heights, California. In far too many places, this increase in religious diversity is matched by an increase in hate crimes and vandalism. While the events of the past several weeks have been too awful to ignore, they are not without precedent.

Within the past two years, the oldest synagogue west of the Mississippi was burned, along with its library of more than 5,000 books. The new mosque in Yugo City, California, was destroyed by fire before it even opened. In Pittsburgh, worshipers arrived at the Hindu Temple to find their deities smashed and the word “Leave” spray-painted across the altar. The Cambodian Buddhist community in Portland, Maine, found a similar message on the wall of its Buddha Hall, which vandals had broken into with an ax. “Dirty Asian Chinks Go Home,” their hate mail read.

While many Christian churches have responded to such attacks with compassion and financial support, others remain unaware or prefer not to get involved. With all due respect to varying attitudes toward those of other faiths, I cannot think of a more important mission for American Christian churches right now than to become centers for dialogue and peacemaking among the world’s religions.

The Friday after the terrorist attacks, 15 students and I were scheduled to attend Friday prayers at the Atlanta Masjid of al-Islam, a predominantly African-American congregation in the Sunni tradition. After a brief debate about our safety, half of us decided to go. The place was packed when we arrived at 2:00 p.m.—perhaps 600 people jammed into a room that included radio and newspaper reporters as well as worshipers.

Finally the call to prayer began, and I heard the sermon I needed to hear. “The red, white and blue is good,” said Imam Plemon El-Amin, “but it is not good enough. The Qur’an teaches us that the world started out as one and will end as one, with one single soul called humanity.” Before Tuesday, he said, Americans saw buildings being blown up all over the world and we looked upon that as something that happened to other people. Now we know that we are those people, and that when any of us is harmed we are all harmed. As costly as this lesson is, it is one that can bring us together instead of tearing us apart—if we will let it.

The jumma ended as it always does, with the entire congregation united in prayer—first standing in straight rows facing Mecca and then kneeling down in perfect unison to touch their foreheads to the ground. From the back of the room where I stood barely breathing, it was like watching a huge, perfect wave curl and fall with a rush toward the shore.

After the service, the students and I were surrounded by well-wishers who hugged us, patted us and kissed us on both cheeks. While I tried to apologize for our ignorance, our tight clothes and ugly scarves, the sisters shushed me. “No, no, no,” one of them said. “It is a blessing for us to have you here—because there are so many misconceptions about Islam, but now you have come to see and hear for yourself what we believe.”

The sisters were right. At the end of one of the most divisive weeks any of us had lived through, there was no mistaking who we were: we were children of one God, with one soul called humanity.