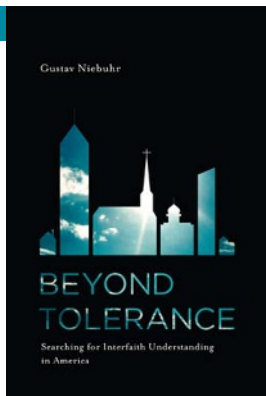


# BEYOND TOLERANCE

## A CONVERSATION with Professor Gustav Niebuhr about his book on interfaith understanding in America

BY AMY SPEACH



IN A GROUNDBREAKING NEW BOOK, GUSTAV NIEBUHR explores religious cooperation in the United States. Niebuhr, a professor of religion and the media in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Newhouse School, was inspired to write *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America* (Viking Penguin,

2008) while he was covering religion for *The New York Times*. In June, Niebuhr will receive the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association, which presents the honor annually for a work published in the United States that is judged to be the most significant contribution to religious liberalism. The grandson of H. Richard Niebuhr and great nephew of Reinhold Niebuhr, two of America's most distinguished theologians, Niebuhr joined the Syracuse University faculty in 2004, after completing a two-year fellowship at Princeton University. He directs the Religion and Society Program in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Carnegie Religion and Media Program in the Newhouse School, and has worked for *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. A frequent commentator on religion for National Public Radio, he has been published in numerous anthologies and magazines.



### Where did the idea for the book come from?

I was a reporter with *The New York Times* in the late 1990s. As the national religion correspondent, one of my duties was to keep an eye on trends in religion in the United States—religious pluralism as expressed through changes in the American population, the growth of religious minorities, their role of involvement in American society. As I pursued that, I became aware of a growing number of groups dedicated to fostering understanding and basic education among people of different faith groups. It seemed to me this was a useful thing because it acted against stereotypes and introduced people to the thoughts, beliefs, and religiously inspired motivations in other people's lives.

After 9/11, my awareness that such groups existed seemed particularly pertinent. So I left the *Times* to explore this landscape—to see who was doing it, and why. In the process, I discovered a grassroots movement that has been growing in the United States, particularly since the mid-'90s, but with a real incentive to grow since 9/11. It seems totally counterintuitive, doesn't it, that such a terrible act of religiously inspired violence should motivate people in that way?

I thought in some ways I was witnessing the birth of something like the environmental movement, before it really took off and there were national organizations to direct it. I was in the pres-

ence of a completely localized movement whose centers weren't really aware of what each other was doing. My sense was if I could explore this and describe it, and also look back into American history and find examples of cooperation between religious groups—something we don't usually talk about happening—then I could not only bring forward an idea and describe a movement, but also show historical precedents that suggested this was the sort of thing that really could happen in America, and have a place in American society.

### How did you discover and decide on the places you visited and wrote about?

It was a process of being aware of some places I had been when I was at the *Times*, and then discovering others. For example, I knew I wanted to go to Baltimore to talk to the people who specialize in Christian/Jewish relations. I knew that institution existed. I had also heard there had been that rather extraordinary historical precedent for good Christian/Jewish relations in the passage of a Jewish civil rights law that occurred in 1826. So I thought, "There's something interesting here." It's as if the ground had been made fertile by this earlier experience in Maryland.

But there were other instances, which I just found as I went along. For example, there was the case on Cape Cod, where a Congregationalist group—Protestants who went way back to the Puritans—had given their church in 1981 to a brand new Jewish congregation that didn't have a home. That made an extraordinary story, almost like nothing else I had seen or come across. I found that simply because I was at a conference where I ran into a rabbi who was the head of that synagogue and he said, "Look, I've got a great story for you. Come see me sometime." And I did!

### What is the significance of the book's title?

In the second chapter of the book, I reflect on the word "tolerance," which one hears so often. You know, if we really think about this, a lot of people are talking about something that is much more than tolerance. They want to go beyond it, and yet they lack the language to do so. So what would it mean if we looked at what was out there beyond tolerance? What would it involve? Through examples, that really is what I tried to describe in the book. The word I tend to use is "engagement," which doesn't mean "agreement," by any means, but does mean an active participation with other people—that you listen. You speak, you listen, and you cooperate. It doesn't mean you agree, say, religiously. But ideally you do find common ethical ground.

I really feel like the United States occupies a special role in fostering religious cooperation—because of our historic stance as a nation in which individual rights are legally enshrined, and because of our status as a place to which people of the world can come, as

well as our status as a communications leader that broadcasts so much to the rest of the world. I had a real hope that if a light was shone on the cooperative activities here, those activities could provide inspiration, at some point, for people elsewhere.

### What was the experience like for you?

One of the things I've always enjoyed as a reporter is simply going out, talking to people, and finding out who they are and what they think. And then trying to represent them as best I could. I felt like this was an extension of that work, but in an area I particularly cared about. It was a real chance to sit down and talk with people at length, find out what they were about, and what brought them to this particular idea that it was really possible and worth-

while to create cooperative projects—whether they were dialogues, or community building, or whether they were aimed at social good works. To see this in different parts of the country reinforced the idea that there's a lot

of creativity out there—a kind of social entrepreneurialism.

### Did anything you discovered surprise you?

The surprises were generally good—people were realistic. I felt like I wasn't dealing for the most part with people who were starry-eyed or anything like that. Those who participated in these efforts were doing it in hopes of reaching the people around them. They didn't have illusions that what they were doing was going to change the world in one fell swoop. But if it could get people—those they immediately reached out to—to think about this process and question how they could be involved in it, then that was good. These efforts struck me as being, for the most part, very reasonable, and also imminently affordable for people to be involved in.

### What has response to the book been like?

It's been positive. A lot of people didn't know such efforts existed, and have been caught up in the negative headlines about religious violence. Part of the response is people are simply intrigued that such work is going on. They didn't know about it because so much of this is local. But by and large, I think people find it hopeful.

The question I get again and again is, "Where is this going?" My answer is, "I don't know." But I think there are grounds for hope that this will stick around, if only because an awareness of religious pluralism is growing, and also because many of the people who are involved realize that the countertrend—that is, toward religious violence—is simply so dangerous, and so destructive.

I hope the book encourages people to think they have permission to learn and to ask questions of others—of their friends and neighbors, the people they work with—so that the mystery of differences is diminished, and so that the possibility of making false assumptions and stumbling into stereotypes is reduced.

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