

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, TOLERANCE & RESPECT

Rev. David M. O'Leary, S.T.L., D.Phil.
University Chaplain

The start of a new academic year is a good time to remember where we as the Tufts University family got its start. In 1852 the Universalists were not being treated very well by the Congregationalists who ran Harvard College. Tufts College was founded on the idea of Religious Liberty for all, all the time. Religious Freedom and Liberty are part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948.

Article 18 states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change one’s religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

It is my prayer and hope that we as the Tufts University family once again at the start of a new year, pledge to uphold religious freedom and liberty for all, all the time.

“Tolerance” is a very hot word in today’s world. Its root meaning is the action or practice of tolerating. Tolerance is the committed action and disposition to be patient with or indulgent to the opinions and practices of others, having a catholicity of spirit. Tolerance is not easy. It does not mean being a door mat so everyone can walk over you. Tolerance is like patience, it is best practiced and lived, not attained. It is my prayer and hope that we as the Tufts University family can commit ourselves to living tolerance.

Respect is the final word. All faith traditions speak of the inherent dignity and respect all people are born with. It is not one’s zip code, vehicle type, clothes, or income that establishes respect and dignity, but life itself. Some faith traditions even say the human person is created in the image and likeness of the Creator. Respect of another’s culture, ethnic background, religion/faith tradition, gender, race, sexual orientation and sexual identity are what we are called to. Respect is to be the norm. It is my prayer and hope that we can mirror the respect we want to receive by how we respect others.

The world renowned ethicist John Courtney Murray, S.J., wrote his book *We Hold These Truths* in 1960. He was speaking of the need of civility in society. He states

“Arguments cease to be civil when it is dominated by passion and prejudice; when its vocabulary becomes solipsist, premised on the theory that my insight is mine alone and cannot be shared; when dialogue gives way to a series of monologues; when the parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another, or hear only what they want to hear, or see the other’s argument only through the screen of their own categories. When things like this happen, people cannot be locked together in argument. Conversation becomes merely quarrelsome or querulous. Civility dies with the death of dialogue.”

Civility dies with the death of dialogue, that is one great line and thought. It is my prayer and hope that we as the Tufts University family may always keep in dialogue with one another.

Religious liberty, tolerance and respect are the tools we should strive to be using at the start of this academic year and throughout our lives. Civility does not mean we do not disagree or hold opposite opinions with one another. But we should be able to disagree with another's opinion or viewpoint without attacking the others' personhood or dignity.

The Office of University Chaplain is strongly committed to protecting religious liberty, and fostering tolerance and respect for all, all the time. The Associate University Chaplains; Rev. Chris Fike, Protestant Chaplain, Imam Nouredine Hawat, Muslim Chaplain and Director of the Islamic Center at Tufts, Ms. Ann Penick, Catholic Chaplain & Director of the Catholic Center at Tufts, and Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Jewish Chaplain and Director of the Hillel Center at Tufts, and I are all here to serve you. We are available whenever you need someone to talk to – to bounce ideas and feelings off of in confidence. We will always try to respond respectfully and non-judgmentally, helping you to clarify your own thoughts and sentiments and to come to your own decisions. Each of us is available to you regardless of your religious tradition (or lack thereof).

Let us begin, with the foundational pillars of religious liberty and freedom, tolerance and respect. Let us begin with dignity and civility for all, all the time. Then as members of the Tufts University family, together we will indeed be light and peace for all.