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* [**News**](https://www.concordmonitor.com/News)
* [**Opinion**](https://www.concordmonitor.com/Opinion)
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* [**Politics**](https://www.concordmonitor.com/Politics)
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* Search

**Opinion: An altar where no walls or names exist**



*This image shows a scene from “Foot Washing,” the 60-second commercial from “He Gets Us” that debuted at the Super Bowl on Sunday, Feb. 11. Julia Fullerton-Batten and Scott Mayo / He Gets Us LLC via AP*

BY STEPHANIE RUTT Published: 02-24-2024 6:00 AM

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*“In my soul there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church where I kneel in prayer. Prayer should bring us to an altar where no walls or names exist.”*– Rabia of Basra

It “was” beautiful. Tender images meant to transport us to a place of acceptance and compassion — the “He Gets Us” Jesus commercial run during the Super Bowl. Yet, even I, an interfaith minister with deep Christian roots, an author who’s examined the Lord’s Prayer through the lens of Aramaic, the language of Jesus, a devotee who on any given morning may be found praying the Christian Orthodox Jesus Prayer — yes, even I knew it was inappropriate and, because it felt completely out of context, came across as uninvited proselytizing.

Want to test it out? Let’s rewind and imagine for a moment you’re watching the Super Bowl and an AI-generated ad comes on displaying depictions of the early female Sufi Saint Rabia reciting the quote above. We can only imagine the fallout!

“What?” “Inappropriate!” “Blasphemy!” “We’re not a Muslim country!”

And there you have it. In addition to the not-so-subtle attempt at proselytizing, the creators and promoters of the “He Gets Us” commercial clearly were making the assumption that this was totally fine because, of course, we’re meant to be a Christian nation, right?

Those promoting this presumed normalization of Christian nationalism would certainly have us believe so and that, indeed, the very founders and framers of the U.S. Constitution meant for us to be a Christian nation. It seems a basic civics lesson is in order here.

First of all, while many of the founders did aspire to Christian values, nowhere in the U.S. Constitution do we find the word “Christian.” In fact, many framers having experienced religious persecution, fiercely defended the right to religious freedom and expressed this clearly in the first line of the First Amendment ushering in the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…”

I find it hard to believe that, had the founders really wanted us to be a Christian theocracy, they would have chosen to hide behind such universal, inclusive, dare I say “woke” language. No. I believe they would have said it straight out: “Congress shall establish that we as a Christian nation shall be governed by the beliefs and values therein.” They did not.

In addition, the Pew Research Center reports that in 2020 the number of Americans identifying as Christian was about 64%, a sharp decline from just thirty years ago (“Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” 9/13/22). About 30% were identified as religiously unaffiliated, and the additional 6% identified with other non-Christian religions.

I’ve found myself wondering how it felt to the roughly one-third non-Christian U.S. population to get highjacked into a “He Gets Us,” Jesus commercial right in the middle of the Super Bowl? “What’s this? I’m not religious,” or “Where’s a commercial about my faith?”

Clearly, we’re in a national identity crisis. Do we want to continue with our experiment in democracy or do we want to become a theocracy under the banner of Christian nationalism? Today, I can still drive down Broad St. in Nashua and find the Nashua Baptist Church right next to the Hindu Temple of New Hampshire. A short walk from downtown, I can still find the Islamic Society of Greater Nashua, Temple Beth Abraham and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua, just to name a small sampling of the diverse houses of worship. However, in just a few months, should the election usher in a new era of autocracy and Christian nationalism, I find myself wondering if all houses of worship will be required to close except those identifying as Christian. It’s a fair question.

It’s important to note that currently all of these houses of worship exist side by side with no problem or controversy. In our great democratic experiment, it’s understood that we each have a responsibility to hold the tension in such diversity. No, it is not important that we believe alike or worship alike. It is only important that we allow each to exist in peace.

Sadly, what’s missing in this tug-of-beliefs for our national identity is recognizing the unity within our diversity. In 2006, the Souhegan Valley Interfaith Council sponsored a conference, “The Golden Rule Across Faith Traditions.” Educational. Inspirational. Designed to bring people together to listen, to share, to work together to create communities that honor and support “all of us” whether you kneel to pray in temples, mosques, shrines or churches.

Pause a moment and imagine how our world, indeed our very lives, would be different if each faith tradition simply encouraged its followers to live the Golden Rule. Perhaps then we could imagine a Super Bowl ad showing ordinary citizens, mixed in with representatives from varying faith traditions, simply practicing random acts of kindness toward one another.

Now that would be something to cheer about.