

Aikidosphere

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Reflections on 9/11

By Yoshimitsu Yamada, 8th dan

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I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the leaders of the magazine Cinturon Negro for sending me a nice letter sympathizing with us during the events of September 11th in New York City. As a matter of fact, I was in Paris at the time, waiting for my flight to return to New York. I just couldn't believe this tragedy. Fortunately, my dojo and all of my students were unharmed. However, some members of the fire department near my school sacrificed their lives trying to save civilians attempting to escape the towering infernos.

Some of our students who had careers in or around the Twin Towers had to flee for their lives and many witnessed atrocities that no human being should ever see. Some of the policemen, as well as electricians and construction workers that train at the dojo have worked tirelessly at Ground Zero, clearing the remains while they pull out victims one by one.

On the day of the tragedy, although we cancelled classes, people kept coming by, as a stopping point on their way home, as all transportation ceased completely. Students gathered at the dojo to connect with other people and feel the sense of community that our dojo provides. We received hundreds upon hundreds of e-mails and phone calls of concern from all over the world, for which we are so incredibly grateful to everyone.

In spite of this unbelievable incident, all of my students and fellow New Yorkers were standing strongly, especially at one particular Aikido seminar after the incident, where many people showed up and practiced harder than usual, as if they were trying to overcome their sadness and sympathy for the victims.

Even with my small amount of knowledge, it appears there was some religious conflict involved in the World Trade Center incident, and the following statement that I'm going to make is not meant to attack individual religions, but simply I'd like to comment about certain religions and Aikido.

In the past, and even now, I am asked, "What should I do when one individual wants to start Aikido, but under one condition, that they cannot bow to the picture of the Founder nor can they practice with a female?" This sometimes happens in my dojo also.

My answer is, "If you cannot bow and cannot practice with the opposite sex, then perhaps you shouldn't train here." I say it in a nice

and polite way. In a Judo dojo, they bow before and after the class to Master Kano. In a Karate dojo, they bow to Master Funakoshi. In Aikido, we bow to Master Ueshiba. And as far as I understand, we are not bowing to them as if they are "God." Simply, we are bowing to them to thank them for the creation of the art they brought us and out of respect for their achievement.

We also bow to our partners to thank them for being our tool to polish our technique. As for Aikido, our Master Ueshiba left his art for all of humanity, regardless of their religion or sex, in order to be able to associate or live together in peace and harmony. To me, to think that the God you believe in is the "only God" is very egotistical and selfish. Who knows, in the place where all the gods live, they are probably talking to each other, joking with each other and even drinking wine together. Who knows? Then why do we have to fight over which one is the "true God?"

As for myself, Aikido is one of the budo that has nothing to do with religion. Of course, our Master was a very religious person, but he never forced us or educated us to follow his religion. I, personally never saw him as a god, but simply, I respected him because he was a great human being.

Just like at other dojos, we have a children's class and I'm so pleased to see so many young people enjoying practicing Aikido. It is a very a difficult job to conduct children's class, especially in Aikido. You need patience, caring and imagination to be qualified to be a teacher of children's class. For that reason, I respect these teachers very much. On the other hand, can you imagine if some of these teachers who are teaching them Aikido teach them with some kind of religious influence? That can be so potentially dangerous.

We can teach children Reigi as we call it in Japanese, or in English, behavior and etiquette, without relating it to religious education. We can teach order, discipline and respect for other people without imposing religious ideology. As far as I'm concerned that is the beauty of budo and the essence of Aikido.