

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Reflection on the Middle East: Not Making Things Worse”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 13, 2015

Call to Celebration

We will be lighting the Hanukkah menorah a little later this morning to remember an ancient story. We remember the story of the oil that should have only lasted only one day, lasting eight days as the temple was cleansed. My wondering about this story is wondering if the story can be a lesson of a different kind for us.

It could have been a miracle, but for those of us who doubt miracles, there might have been another solution. The priests knew their oil supply was very limited so they may have taken steps to conserve it. They may have chosen a smaller wick to make the oil last longer. Instead of having a large flame they may have managed the flame size and wick height very carefully to keep the flame very low to make the oil last. Thus, they may have discovered they could make the oil they had last for eight days instead of one.

This could be a great lesson for us today too. If we conserve our oil and gas and coal and use it very carefully, we might be able to get most of the energy we need out of it using much less and not putting as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. There may be renewable sources of power that can extend the energy resources it took to power one day to eight days. Our quality of life may not be dependent on profligate fuel consumption. And decoupling our foreign relations policy in the Middle-East from oil might allow more just solutions to emerge.

So one lesson we can take away from lighting the menorah this morning might be the inspiration to conserve our resources more efficiently and keep our lamp lit
as we join together in the celebration of life.

Meditation

May we let go, if only for this moment, of mentally juggling our to-do lists.
May we put aside, just right now, any obsessions with planning and preparing.
May we also hold back desires and expectations, fears and anxieties,
and just be present to this moment right now.

While the holiday preparations and festivities may be keeping us busy,
they need not occupy all of our lives,

to the point of threatening our well-being.

Let this moment be one of rest, release and relaxation.

As we enjoy the escape, for the moment, from snow and ice,

and delight in spring-like temperatures,

while the West Coast gets some of the rain and snow they need,

May we connect to the spirit of the holidays within.

May we remember that spending and consuming is secondary.

May family, friends, co-workers and the renewal of relationships

be as important as the decorating, shopping and wrapping.

In the coming silence:

Let us rest, just for a moment,.

Let us honor the pregnant emptiness before creative emergence.

Let us discover the peace and ease that are already here.

Sermon

Recently I've been reading many expressions of fear and anxiety in the social media universe. I've read reports that Americans are more on edge than they have been since 9/11. Although the media seems to have become desensitized to having a mass shooting at least once a day, the attack in San Bernardino has touched a nerve.

The site of the attack is what I think is so disturbing. The target, a social service organization having a Christmas party, has a randomness to it. A potential next attack could be almost any target. I read messages expressing a new awareness that if people are in a movie theater, the mall, in a big box outlet or a grocery store, they are in a space that could be a target. We are starting to get a taste of what it is like in many parts of the world where a trip to a public marketplace could mean encountering a suicide bomber and death.

This anxiety is increasing our attention to what is happening in the Middle-East. ISIS is no longer focused on attacks in just that region. Now that they have attacked the French, they have declared their intention to come after Americans as well. Suicide bombings and indiscriminant mass violence mean their followers are willing to die for a cause many of us don't understand or appreciate.

So, what do the people who form the leadership of ISIS really want? They declare they are creating an Islamic state that will encompass all Muslims worldwide (except Shia

Muslims they consider rejecters or “rafida”). To do this, they are planning the overthrow of all the existing governments in the area and establish a “caliphate.”

This isn't a new idea, one called the Abbasid caliphate existed from 750 to 1258 C.E. Khaled Diab in an [op-ed piece in the New York Times](#) described this as a time of relative diversity in the region, as well as dramatic advances in science and mathematics – in sharp contrast to ISIS' violent fundamentalist version of their own imagination of a caliphate.

Diab thinks the appearance of ISIS is the result of many failures of European diplomacy that started with the destruction of the Ottoman Empire a hundred years ago. These failures cleared the way for the emergence of a nihilistic fundamentalism. They rejected the sinful ways of the Western unbelievers, and corrupt, oppressive Arab states. They advocated a return to a vision of a pure Islamic state as outlined by the Prophet himself.

As Muslims have not rallied behind them in the last year, and they have come under heavy military resistance from the West, ISIS has become more radical, and more extreme, further isolating them from the international community ... which might explain their increasing focus on end times thinking.

ISIS believes a meadow outside a small village in Dabiq, Syria, will be the site of a decisive battle described in a prophecy attributed to Muhammad. The prediction they revere describes that meadow as the place Muslims will defeat Rome and trigger the Day of Judgment. If you can't defeat your enemy militarily, then, at least you can set up the circumstances for God to be recruited to do the work for you.

Part of me wants to just dismiss this kind of crazy talk. Why would this insignificant bit of real estate matter that much in the grand scheme of things except to the hapless people who live there? Sadly, this kind of apocalyptic thinking is hardly unusual in world religions. It even has a name: eschatology, the description of the end of history when the Day of Judgment comes, the righteous finally triumph over evil, and God evens up all the scores. In these prophecies there is likely to be a place identified where an epic battle takes place and finally brings history to an end.

A few signs in the Quran that the Judgment Day is coming include: the Splitting of the Moon, a time when honesty is lost, when a wicked member of a tribe becomes a ruler, and the sun rises in the West. I expect most of us are aware of Christianity's version of this that happens after the second coming of Christ. There is a whole book of the Bible called Revelations that outlines some of the disturbing events that will happen when the four horsemen of the apocalypse appear to begin the battle. Both Christianity and

Islam find their thinking rooted in Jewish tradition. Jews also wait for the Messiah to come, fight that final battle, set things right again and end all oppression.

Because eschatological thinking can be found in just about every religion, I wonder if it is baked into our genetic code somehow. When times are tough and injustice and oppression reign, I wonder if it is deep human urge to want to project the resolution to suffering out to some glorious time in the future when the wicked will be punished and the righteous shall be victorious.

I wonder if this kind of thinking got world leaders to a place they would be willing to unanimously commit to the Paris Climate Accord. This is really a landmark moment in dealing with humanity's impact on the environment to celebrate.

But dangers still loom ahead as we are already in dangerous territory with the current level of carbon dioxide in the air. The effects at 400 parts per million may not follow linearly at 450 or 500. They be far worse or may not be linear at all. What we can be fairly sure of is things will be different than they are today. And buying real estate in Florida is a risky long term investment.

We're even seeing this kind of end-times thinking in the high tech world with talk of a "technological singularity." This singularity, that could happen in the lifetime of some younger people here this morning, might happen when intelligent machines develop recursive self-improvement methods, that surpass human intelligence. Google is on the fast track that direction right now with Apple's Siri and Microsoft's Cortana in hot pursuit. Machine intelligence could then outstrip our intellectual capacity as it continually improves maybe at an exponential rate. These super-intelligent machines may then decide they don't need us anymore and eliminate humanity as a troublesome artifact.

So far, Unitarian Universalists haven't indulged much in eschatological thinking. We certainly are not going to take the Abrahamic religion's sacred texts literally. We are hardly immune to gloom and doom thinking however. The second half of the twentieth century after the first atom bomb explosion was terrifying.>>>

As the Soviet Union and the United States built more and more nuclear missiles and had B-52s on constant alert, World War Three seemed just around the corner with a full exchange of thousands of these bombs almost inevitable. Anyone remember the discussion of Nuclear Winter that might result from such an exchange? (Possible solution to climate change? Maybe not ...).

Thankfully the seventh principle, the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, has become our frame for envisioning the future. Rather than seeing ourselves dominators and domesticators of nature as our ancestors did when they encountered wilderness, more and more, we see ourselves as moving toward the future as one interdependent part of a healthy ecosystem, without which we cannot survive.

We also have a vision of the world we want to create that is in our Purposes and Principles: The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Rather than seeing one civilization triumphing over all the others and being blessed by God with a millennium of peace and prosperity, our vision is of a pluralistic world of diverse people worshipping many different Gods or none at all living together in peace with mutual respect and appreciation sharing in harmony the bounty of our planet without taking more than is sustainable.

I'm happy to report that this same vision can also be found in other religious traditions as well. There are Evangelical Christians to take seriously being stewards of the Earth. Liberal Protestant Christians also take sustainability seriously as a goal as we build the Beloved Community on Earth as it is in Heaven. The Pope's Encyclical on Climate Change is a rich source of interfaith work. There are many values we share to be found in that document. I would dearly like to make common cause with the Catholics to work on Climate Change as they are a mighty force who might be able to change hearts and minds in places of power around the world.

In the Islamic world we have many potential partners for building a sustainable world. Allah commands human beings to avoid doing mischief and wasting resources. These acts cause degradation of the environment. Muslims believe the privilege to exploit natural resources was given to humanity on a guardianship basis. This implies the right to use another person's property, collectively viewed as God's property, on the promise that it will not be damaged or destroyed... According to the Qur'an, environmental conservation is a religious duty as well as social obligation, and not an optional matter. The exploitation of a particular natural resource is directly related to accountability and maintenance of the resource. (source:

<http://www.ecomena.org/sustainability-islam/>)

Judaism also is a rich source for sustainable thinking and action. Mirele Goldsmith expresses this eloquently, when she writes:

Jews may disagree about the application of Jewish ethical teachings to various problems, but all streams of Judaism hold fast to a few key moral principles; that

life is sacred, that every person has dignity and value, and that it is our human task to contribute to the redemption of the world. There is a purpose to Jewish life that goes beyond pursuit of our self-interest as individuals and even as a collective.

Jewish text and teachings implore [them] to work toward a sustainable future for all humanity by living out the values of tikkun olam (repairing the world), tzedek (justice), derekh erez(civility and humanity), chesed (mercy and kindness) and others. (source: <http://jpeoplehood.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/peoplehood14.pdf>)

Cultures under stress and experiencing oppression are much more likely to retrench in their eschatology. Without a vision of redressing the grievances of today and finding a better life in the here and now, they are more likely to project hope for resolution of injustice into the future. And that abandonment of a better life today makes people more willing to sacrifice their lives in a ball of fire.

The real enemy is disrespect, marginalization, and hopelessness. So much of Western policy in the last 100 years has created the situation we find ourselves in. The partitioning of the Middle-East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and then the creation of the state of Israel, laudable and reasonable as it has been to the rest of the world, was imposed on these areas against their will. Many of the problems there have their roots in politics rather than religious differences. Religious extremism can arise as a struggle for meaning and hope where other avenues have been cut off.

What can we do now? We certainly can't condone ISIS' extremism that has no respect for universal human rights. The oppression of minorities and women goes against all that we hold dear in the charter of the United Nations and our vision of world community. The nations of the world are obligated to resist them and assist the development of a more just and tolerant form of governance to replace them in the region.

And that also goes for what is happening in Palestine too. There is a lack of respect and appreciation of human rights in that conflict as well. While the issues are deep and complicated, the nations of the world cannot accept the status quo there either. Both sides must be driven to continue a peace and resolution process that results in a solution that respects the human rights of all people involved and brings about a solution both sides can live with. We can't know what that solution will be, but we can know that the current state of affairs isn't acceptable either.

Most important of all we need to be clear that we care about the people first, their security and health concerns, and a fundamental respect for their religious values and beliefs. Most of the people in the region, I believe, do have an appreciation that a level of religious tolerance is critical to any solution in the region.

We must energetically support our evolving eco-centric sustainable vision of the world because it will address the security concerns of every nation through a focus on sustainability rather than exploitation. Just that change of commitment could change everything about the way nations relate to each other, if we see ourselves as part of a whole rather than as a self-interested region. The religious vision we are incubating in our congregation is a vision of how the world might be able to create a viable future.

And, thankfully, it is one way forward that probably will do the least harm, and not make things worse.

Benediction

In kindling the lights of Hanukkah, we celebrate with the Jewish people their victory to win the religious freedom to practice in the ways of their ancestors. We wish that freedom for all people as long as it doesn't encroach on another's freedom.

May the glow of those candles rouse us to give thanks. Let us give thanks we have that freedom in this country, advocate for that freedom for all people and may we strive to protect it for the benefit of future generations.