

IRAQ: GOD AND WAR
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INTRODUCTION

As we meet this morning, thousands of people, most of them Christians, some Jews, some Muslims, are wrapping up three days of protest in the nation's capital. The slogans on the signs are familiar echoes from another generation and another failed attempt to impose American will: "Get Out Now!" "No More War!" "Not In My Name!" In fact, there are many similarities between that war and the one being waged in Iraq, but there is at least one key difference: God is a major player in this one. To be sure, the war in Iraq is a military matter. The war in Iraq is a political matter. The war in Iraq is an economic matter. It's about culture; it's about ethnicity, too. And it's about God.

What I hope to do this morning is lay bare the diseased theological underbelly of the three religions that have collided in that land of desert and oil, for God's name has been evoked in numerous ways, both overtly and covertly. Put bluntly, some very dysfunctional theology has, yet again in the checkered history of humankind, helped create and sustain bloodletting. When shall we ever learn?

Please know that it's been somewhat uncomfortable to write such a sermon as this, for we religious liberals value tolerance and fairness. (Heck, Universalism is our middle name!) But sometimes I fear that we compromise our prophetic tradition in the name of tolerance and fairness. And it is that prophetic tradition that I'd like to cite as the authority for these observations – that, and the simple fact that some of us have had enough of this so-called "war on terror" and the twisted theology used to justify it. We'd like to take God off the hook for a war begun by human beings.

JUADIASM AND IRAQ

The Book of Exodus is about hard times. Moses and the still loosely knit Hebrew nation have been enslaved by the Egyptians. The great patriarch has made his case

to those who rule Egypt, uttering his famous “Let my people go!” in the royal courtyard. Pharaoh, that perennial, dastardly antagonist of the “Red Sea” story, finally sees it Moses’ way, and releases the Hebrews from their bondage. (Old Pharaoh received a little incentive from God as you may recall...something to do with the sprinkling of lamb’s blood on the doorposts and the vast majority of first-born children dropping dead.)

But wait a minute. God – the same God that only a few verses earlier had arranged their release – now tells Pharaoh to chase after Moses and his homesick crowd. God says to Moses in Exodus 14:

...I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them [Israel] and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord...

This fickle, grossly insecure and punishing God notwithstanding, Pharaoh plays the antagonist to the hilt:

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, “What is it this that we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, and took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel as they went forth defiantly. The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped by the sea...

That’s a lot of chariots, folks!

Meanwhile back at the kabbal, the armchair Israelites that had tried to convince Moses that it was better to be servants in Egypt than wander in the wilderness, start telling Moses what a fool he was for trusting Pharaoh:

And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord; and they said to Moses, “Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not what we said to you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?’ For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

Moses being Moses – our heroic protagonist – he is not pleased; he stands his ground:

“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to stand still.”

A mighty wind is gathering as the Egyptians draw closer. It's obvious that the Children of Israel will be pushed into the sea. And it's right here that those of us of a certain age cut to that clear, lucid movie scene – you know, the one where the future president of the National Rifle Association, playing a pretty good Moses (for a Gentile), stretches out his hand causing the Red Sea to part? Indeed, there appears a dry-land road separating a heaving wall of water on either side! The Hebrews are escaping!

Now, let's stop right there. Many a soul might pause to ponder the implications of following a crowd whose deity can whip up a wind so strong that a dry road materializes through a sea bed, but evidently the king of Egypt wasn't one of them. Pharaoh and his armies kept up the chase.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.” So Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its wonted flow...and the Lord routed the Egyptians in the midst of the sea; not so much as one of them remained...

And the writers of what we know today as the Book of Exodus knew how to end a story. They attached this epilogue:

...Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and his servant Moses.

This is where we get serious, folks. The God of Exodus is by no means the only image of God within Judaism, ancient or modern; it's the God of *ultra-orthodox* Judaism, the one co-opted by those Jews who read the Hebrew scriptures through a *selective, literal* lens. [He] is long on law and short on grace. [He] is not to be made taken lightly; [he] will massacre whole armies in the interest of those who obey [him]. And [he] is an actor in the cast of a long-running tragedy called "the war on terror". Not sure? Think rabid Zionism. Think stilted American foreign policy. Think convoluted Israeli leadership. Think all these things, just don't think this warrior-god represents the God of most Jews.

CHRISTIANITY AND IRAQ

At first glance, the God of the Christian scriptures has evidently been referred to an anger management class, so different is [he] from the God of Moses. Sure, there are lots of times when fearful images and possible scenarios appear in the New Testament, but most of the truly violent stuff is confined to that strange compilation of literature called The Book of Revelations, right? The answer to that question is not as simple as our North American Christian bias would indicate:

- The Gospels predict "wars and rumors of wars", "false prophets" and "tribulation" – all in the context of a recurring us/them theme that sometimes pits nascent Christianity against Judaism, sometimes Christians against non-believers (pagans)

- Those letters often referred to as the Pauline literature tell us that the earliest Christians expected Jesus to return and lead them in an earthly battle with Rome, as well as a spirit-against-spirit war between Satan and God – Israel will be restored to power (Romans), the Rapture will follow the appearance of the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians) and Jesus will judge the “quick and the dead” (2 Timothy)

And then there’s the Book of Revelations, a patchwork of imagery worthy of a bad Stephen King book. Here we find horrific violence and suffering, constant war, earthly leaders in a fight-to-the death battle with Jesus, the restoration of Israel, a thousand-year reign of godliness and the infamous Battle of Armageddon, (one of three final conflicts in which...well, in which people like you and me don’t fare all that well, if you know what I mean...).

Stay with me, for by no means am I suggesting that this God is the only version in Christianity, ancient or modern; this is the God of *ultra-orthodox* Christianity, the one co-opted by those who read the Christian scriptures through a *selective, literal* lens. This God is the God that is so offended by human imperfection and independence that [he] decides to use [his] “son” as a human sacrifice. As the Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker reminds us, an act of cruel violence lies at the very heart of orthodox, selectively literal, Christianity. To interpret that story as a loving one is possible, *but not when taken literally*.

Comes then the question then: How does a God that arranges to have [his] beloved son tortured and murdered – *a God in whose image we are supposedly made* – how does that God do anything to discourage war in defense of [himself] or “his people?” Sadly, this God, too, is an actor in the cast of the tragedy, modern-day Iraq. But this God does not much resemble the God that most Christians worship. Their God is not the warrior-god either.

And what about Allah, God of Islam? Is [he] the blood thirsty, jihad-happy terrorist of print and screen? Is the Koran really just a how-to book for Muslim terrorism?

Like the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the Koran contains material that can be cited, *selectively and literally*, to support all manner of human evils. Consider these examples:

- *...Mohammed is Allah's apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers but merciful to one another.*
- *When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield, strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly...*
- *Those that disbelieve and debar others from Allah's path, and in the end die unbelievers, shall not be shown forgiveness by Allah. Therefore do not falter or sue for peace...*
- *...let those who fight in the way of Allah, who sell this world's life for the hereafter; and whoever fights in the way of Allah, then be slain or be victorious, we shall grant him a mighty reward.*
- *Those who believe fight in the way of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of Satan. Fight therefore against the friends of the Satan...*

By no means should we believe that this God is the only God of Islam, ancient or modern; this is the Allah of the ultra-orthodox Muslim, those who read the Koran through the lens of selective literalism. This is the God that puts in the mouth of prophet, Mohammed, directions to massacre in order to gain eternal life. This is the God that incites terrorists to board passenger planes and fly them into tall buildings. This is the God that sees the world as [his] battleground for a titanic struggle against Satan and his infidels. And this God is an actor in the tragedy, modern-day Iraq. But this God is by no means representative of most Islamic theology. There are millions, worldwide, for whom Allah is nothing like the warrior-god.

So where does all this distorted theology leave us? More or less where we've always

been. Long before the action in Afghanistan and Iraq, Sunnis and Shiites had gone to war over which strain of Islam is “true”. Long before the Palestinians and the Jews were launching rockets last summer, Judaism itself had divided into three main branches: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. And Christianity? Long before the wild-eyed Bible-thumping crowd saw in this war a skirmish leading up to Armageddon, the Romans and the Orthodox parted company (1054 C.E.). Then there are the Protestants – otherwise rational human beings who have made a sport of dividing themselves over such weighty issues as sprinkling versus full immersion, King James Version or Revised Standard.

These three great religions cannot be seen as monolithic, single-cell belief systems; within each are countless disagreements as to which strain is closest to the “true” Judaism, Christianity or Islam. My point here is that each faith tradition is plagued with believers that have twisted it to serve their own interests, and hijacked it to justify their narrow ends. Given this, no student of history should be surprised to learn that in the Middle East in general, and the shooting war in Iraq in particular, these three religions are in play.

Little wonder then that the humanists among us scratch their heads and wonder how on God’s green earth these three religions, soiled by the hatred and prejudice of some seriously twisted people, can be part of the answer and not the problem.

But people of conscience – Jews, Christians, Muslims or otherwise – do not have the luxury of pretending that theology has nothing to do with the mounting civilian as well as military death count. The fact that God is being used, yet again, as a blunt instrument with which to bludgeon enemies, should grab our attention if, for no other reason, because we are among those who believe religion can give life as well as take it. We say here, week in and week out, that religious freedom matters. We say that ancient scripture is not a credible source of wisdom when interpreted literally, and that treating it as the literal Word of God is idolatrous. We say that, just as the people of the warrior-gods find strength in numbers, we are sustained by like-

minded folk within and without the walls of Nora Church. We say that justice needs friends and peace requires intentionality.

I don't mean to imply that just because we say these things, we always *get* these things! But in a time like this – a time when some Israeli Jews would rather use the gun than surrender land, a time when some American Christians would rather wrap the cross in the flag than break political rank, a time when some Middle Eastern Muslims would rather kill civilians than lose power – the more of us who can speak intelligently about God and war, the better.

I began with a story from the Hebrew scriptures, and I'd like to end with one, this time from The Book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah, like Isaiah, is often referred to as a “major” prophet; he lived in yet another crucial period of Jewish history that included yet another set of wars and captivity. He has been warning Israel's leaders that God is displeased with both them and their people, appearing in visions to Jeremiah to condemn and convict Israel for lack of trust in [him] and care of the needy.

Jeremiah wrestles with God at night, and his fellow Jews during the day, trying to spare Israel another defeat at the hands of their enemies. But he is unsuccessful as a lobbyist for God, so God begins positioning foreign armies, in three directions, around the Hebrews. And Jeremiah confounds them all by going to the local courthouse and buying a piece of land.

When friends and other asked him why he would pay money for a field that he would never live on – never see again – he told them, simply, that he had faith that God would once again bring peace to Israel and all her enemies. He told them that, one day, fields would again be bought and sold there. He told them that despite the war, the suffering, the refugees, the dead and the wounded, peace would return to the land.

People of conscience believe in as-of-yet unseen things. Clean air. Clear water. Full bellies. Equal justice. And people of conscience, just like Jeremiah in his nation's time of war, believe in peace when peace seems impossible. People of conscience believe in peace despite war.

Nora friends, there is nothing to do but think, talk, embody and work for peace. There are no magic or immediate solutions to the slaughter in Iraq. Although the Republicans are, on the whole, beginning to take responsibility for ending the war in Iraq, and, although the Democrats are, on the whole, pressing for a time table, no one knows for sure when peace will descend on the tortured land and its tortured people. No one.

What we *do* know for sure is that religion was a player in the creation of that war, as well as its continuance. Can religion be a player in the *ending* of that war? If so, it will be because people like you and me, in every country involved in this war, stop enabling bad theology, Jewish, Christian, Muslim or otherwise. It will be because the voice of religion and reason will be heard among the din. It will be because we, like millions of others, will have given our time, talent and dollars in an effort to bring the various political, military and religious leaders to negotiate a difficult, but just and lasting, peace.

Religion helped get us into this fix. Perhaps it help can get us.

May it be so.