

Fear of the Barbarians

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Over the past couple of weeks, a number of you asked me: how was my summer? Sometimes, because I didn't want to go into it, I just said "fine;" other times, I said: "up and down," "a mixed bag." Fact is, I'd just as soon forget the month of July: house guests that didn't behave very well, sickness in my family, cool, rainy weather, gut wrenching plunges in world financial markets, the widespread riots in Great Britain—do you remember July? Not my favourite month this year.

And then July ended in a truly tragic, horrible way when seventy-six people were killed in Norway by a lone assailant in two terrorist attacks—a bomb blast in downtown Oslo and the shootings at a Norwegian Labour Party summer youth camp. I was stricken by the carnage, the assault on innocent kids, on innocence and decency itself. And then, as news subsequently disclosed the identity of the terrorist—a self-styled Christian crusader who hoped to trigger what he called "a Christian war to defend Europe against the threat of Muslim domination"—I became even more heart and soul-sick. Sick in heart and soul, because I knew that while his atrocious actions were heinous to the ultimate degree, his ideas and acts were informed and instigated by a wider climate and rhetoric of fear of the Other, especially the Islamic Other, by hatred of multiculturalism, and so-called left wing political ideology—fear and hatred that *to this day* is being spewed out on blogs and web-sites, by talk show hosts, writers, and by anti-immigrant, religious, and nationalist parties and organizations in Europe and North America.

Bear with me, I know this isn't particularly uplifting—but sometimes we've got to walk through the valley of the shadow before we attain some higher ground and light.

There was something else about that late July attack that stuck in my mind—it reminded me of something—when with a disturbing jolt, I remembered that during a late July weekend almost exactly three years ago to the day, a gunman entered a Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, and opened fire during the Sunday morning worship service. Two people were killed and seven injured; the first to die was a sixty-year-old church usher who heroically placed himself in the line of fire, thus saving other lives. The gunman continued to shoot until he was tackled and wrestled to the ground by church members.

Both men, the first in Tennessee, the second in Norway, wrote manifestos before the murders justifying their motivations and deeds; and though different in age and education, separated by time and a continent away from each other—their statements shared some sobering similarities. Both claimed we live in dire, urgent times of impending cultural collapse — that an alien conspiracy threatens the time-honoured national traditions, identity, and institutions of the “West.” They called their targets “traitors.” Both identified liberal, progressive people, politics, and organizations as “evil” and criminally responsible. Both admitted that since they couldn’t get close enough to liberal leaders, they attacked the “foot soldiers,” the rank-and-file voters, the rising generation, and in so doing, both hoped to instigate a war of civilizations. And finally, both cited right-wing, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, liberal-hating authors and sources as inspiration for their murderous deeds.

Fortunately, some great good arose in the wake of these tragedies. In Oslo, over a 100,000 people rallied to mourn the victims and to express their unity and commitment to democratic ideals and a multicultural Norway. In Knoxville, public sympathy and support for our UU congregation was astonishing; dozens of religious groups across the spectrum, including

evangelical Christian communities, rallied in solidarity and worshipped together with the Tennessee Valley UU congregation.

I wish that was the end of the story: with decency triumphant, compassion all around, demagogues defanged, inter-religious, inter-cultural harmony and dialogue sweeping the land. Unfortunately, the hate-mongering rhetoric continues, Islamophobia persists, extreme nationalism and anti-immigrant parties either govern or are rising in popularity in a number of European nations and south of our border. Recently, even the so-called mainstream leaders of Germany, France, and Great Britain have declared multiculturalism a failure. So notwithstanding some recent good news, signs of decency, and recommitment to the value of a culturally diverse landscape—the ground on which we stand keeps getting carved up by peddlers of contempt, ignorance, and fear which works to divide us into mutually exclusive camps: secular vs. religious, rational vs. superstitious, western vs. eastern, patriotic vs. traitorous, civilized vs. barbarian. (see Nicholas Kulish, “Norway attacks put spotlight on rise of Right-Wing sentiment in Europe, *NYTimes*, July, 23, 2011)

The word “barbarian” first made its appearance in ancient Greece in the 6th century BC. It was used to contrast a world divided into unequal parts: the so-called “civilized” Greeks vs.well, basically everyone else: all foreigners, speakers of languages other than Greek, worshippers of strange gods, people with alien, different cultural practices. That dividing up of humanity into two opposing camps: us vs. them, civilized vs. savage continues right down to today.

In one sense, the distinction between “barbarian” and “civilized” is still useful. That is, if by “civilized” we mean: people who are able to recognize the humanity of others fully **and** willing to discover that others live in ways different from us. The recognition and discovery of our shared humanity and difference can make it possible for us to see ourselves as if through

another's eyes—an experience that can equip us not only to exercise critical judgment toward others, but also towards ourselves.

And when I say “barbarian” or “barbaric” I mean—“the acts and attitudes of those who...reject the humanity of others, or judge them to be radically different from themselves,” and thus will refuse “to grant others the right to access the same joys and the same goods that we ourselves hope to enjoy.” Barbarism, then, can range from humiliation and inflicting suffering, to the killing of innocent people. I think it can even mean “institutional discrimination against others who do not belong to my linguistic community, or my social group, or my psychological type.” (on civilized and barbarian, see T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, 18, 21-23)

I wouldn't want to live in a culture where the distinction between civilized and barbaric was forbidden or irrelevant: the actions of that Norwegian terrorist were wantonly barbaric; the language, the attitudes of contempt for Islam, for immigrants, and for progressive politics and politicians that spews out every day on the web, the media, from the pulpit and the political rostrum is barbaric.

But not just out there...what about closer to home? Why was it, what purpose did it serve for Canadians to host a speaking tour by Ann Coulter in the spring of 2010? Who invited her here? Coulter's the US author who's said that “my only regret with the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh is he didn't go to the New York Times Building,” who said that Muslims are “absolutely insane savages,” and that “it would be better if we were all Christians.” Why was it, what purpose did it serve for Charles McVety's Canada Christian College and the so-called International Free Press Society to invite and host speeches by Geert Wilders, the Dutch nationalist, anti-Muslim politician (and one of Anders Breivik's heroes) who called the prophet Muhammad a “barbarian” and a “murderer,” who compared the *Quran* to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*,

who asserts that Islam is a fascist ideology, and that the political left is Islamizing Europe? Can someone tell me why Wilders spoke in Toronto and at the federally-funded National Arts Centre in Ottawa—where he used the podium to assert his hateful, snarky and apocalyptic ideas? (see

Doug Saunders, “The scary world of Geert Wilders,” *Globe and Mail*, Mar. 5, 2010; Gerald Caplan, “The Canadian who embrace Ann Coulter,” *Globe and Mail*, Ap.2, 2010, and “Demonizing Muslims: To what end?” *Globe and Mail*, Aug.19, 2011; Gloria Galloway, “Why is the National Arts Centre hosting Dutch MP accused of being anti-Islam?” *Globe and Mail*, May 10, 2011)

Are we really threatened in Canada by a “demographic jihad”; that we’re about to be “Islamicized?” Do we think that “Islam is not a religion...but a political and cultural system...with a mandate for a hostile takeover...and that our time [here in Canada] is running out?” That’s what Charles McVety, Mr. Wilders’ Canadian host believes. Mr.McVety, whose Canada Family Action Coalition strives to “see Judeo-Christian moral principles restored in Canada,” likes to boast that “a lot of our friends are in government now.” Friends in government indeed. (see “Charles McVety Hosts Geert Wilders,” May 6, 2011, www.benedictionblogson.com/ Marci McDonald, “Stephen Harper and the Theo-Cons,” *Walrus*, October 2006)

The line that runs from civilized to barbarian is a continuum: on one end, a person recognizes the humanity of others fully and is willing to discover, understand and appreciate that others live in ways different from us; on the other end, those who reject the humanity of others, or judge them to be radically different from themselves, and thus refuse to grant others the right to access the same joys and the same goods that we ourselves would hope to enjoy. *Where am I on that continuum*, where are we, here in Canada—driven by fear, by reason, by despair, by hope? And before I get perhaps too smug about it: what about my own feelings when I see a woman covered from head to foot in a niqab? Or when busloads of Chinese real estate tourists stop in front of houses in this town that my children or I will never be able to afford? Or when Charles McVety boasts of all his friends in government?

I agree with authors like Timothy Garton Ash, and with the *Globe and Mail's* Doug Saunders, that it is imperative that fear-driven misinformation, that incitements to prejudice and violence, must not go unanswered. Media, politicians, and citizens who value an open, diverse society have a responsibility to assure freedom of religion and speech *and* a responsibility to puncture dangerous myths with reason, fact and common sense—and that we do this in the realms of politics, of print, web and broadcast media, public education, and in our homes and places of work and worship. (from Ash, “The internet nourished Norway’s killer...,” *Guardian*, July 29, 2011; Doug Saunders, “Norway shows we must expose dangerous fictions,” *Globe and Mail*, July 30, 2011)

In places where we worship. The Rev. Olav Tveit, is a Norwegian Lutheran pastor and President of the World Council of Churches. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks in his home country, in calling for prayers from around the world for the victims and their families, he said this: “Let us stay together for a world of justice and peace, without hate and revenge, but with the values of democracy, caring for the dignity and human rights of every person. [For] we are all created in the image of God.” (from Chuck Curry, “Blogs, Faith and Norway: Terror and Responsibility)

Fifty years ago, Wilfred Cantwell Smith—one of the great scholars of religion—posed a question in Montreal to a joint session of Canadian Church historians, theologians and biblical scholars, which, I think, really applies to the journey we’re taking in this sermon today. Here’s his question, fifty years old now: “How does one account, theologically, for the fact of the religious [and cultural] diversity of the human family?” Because we are a religious and ethical community—and not just individuals, families, or a political party—because we are a religious community of shared values here, I think it’s important for us to try to respond to Smith’s question, a question that, fifty years later, is one of the most important and vexing questions facing people of faith traditions to this day. (Smith, *Religious Diversity...*, 1976, p. 15)

Here is what I would recommend. First, as religious people, we should be able to respond to pernicious, misinformed religious and theological claims with citations of religious literature and history—to convict religious and cultural bigots with their own scripture and traditions. Let’s remind them that when Hillel—perhaps the greatest rabbi in the Jewish tradition—and when Jesus were asked to sum up the very essence of their scripture and religion, they both cited the same passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus (Dt. 6:5, Lev. 19:8): “Love the Lord your God...and your neighbour as yourself.” And when Jesus was asked who is my neighbour?: he told the parable of the Samaritan—he used a *Samaritan!*, a member of a religious community despised by his fellow Jews in that era for their alien ways and unorthodox, deviant beliefs and practices, to describe just who that neighbor is whom we should love.

After the attacks in Norway, Rev. Tveit, the Lutheran pastor, said let us care “for the dignity and human rights of every person. [For] we are all created in the image of God.” In the Abrahamic traditions, there is a long line of interpretation which claims that being created in the image of God is expressed in our spiritual and moral character; that is resides in our relations with the divine and with one another. The divine image in us is not some static essence given to us once for all, but something that is made every moment in how we relate to the created world and to the human family.

Indeed, the very diversity of the human family, according to the Talmud, is one of the greatest witnesses of the love and power of God: “The greatness of the Holy One...is thus demonstrated. For whereas man prints many coins from one die, each one the replica of each other, the Holy One blessed by He, stamped every person with the die of Adam [and Eve] and yet no one exactly resembles” each other. The intent of this saying is that each of us is a unique creation, that human diversity is *the point, the intent*, and that it’s *good*—whether we like it or

jnbvhnnot. And to drive this lesson home, the Talmud passage continues: “Therefore man [and woman] were created unique and on their own, to teach you that whosoever destroys one soul is regarded by the Torah as if he destroyed a whole world, and whosoever saves one soul is regarded as if he had saved a whole world.” (on the “long line of interpretation” and the mishna in B Talmud, *Sanhedrin*: 37a, see Steven Kepnes, “Adam/Eve: From Rabbinic to Scriptural Anthropology,” etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume4/number2)

To cite one more example of the value of human diversity embedded in the heart of religion, consider the following passages from the *Quran*:

- For each of them We have established a law; and a revealed way. And if God wished, God would have made you a single nation; but the intent is to test you in what God has given you. So let your goals be everything good. (Sura 5:48)
- And God is the one who created you all from one soul...from a single self... (Sura 6: 98, 189) And everything God has scattered over the earth for you is different in color and form; surely that is a sign for people who are mindful. (Sura 16:13)
- Among the signs of God is the constitution of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colors... (Sura 30:22)
- O humankind, We created you from a male and a female, and We made you races and tribes for you to get to know each other. (Sura 49:13)

I am very aware of the fact that scriptures and the histories of nearly every religious tradition are studded with murderous and hateful verses, accounts, people and events that appeal to that which is most base in us. But where are we going to stand on the continuum of the civilized to the barbaric? To what can we appeal in confrontations with misinformation, prejudice, and violent rhetoric and deeds if not those verses, persons, events and aspirations in religion that speak and yearn for that which is most noble, just and ultimately true of us?

And here, our second theological response to that fifty year old question about religious and cultural diversity comes into play. We have a religious tradition of our own—deeply principled and laden with civilizing values. Seven Principles define what we believe together, and how we

aspire to act to achieve those beliefs and values. The “Sources of our Living Tradition” point to where we can turn for inspiration and for criteria—that is, standards we use when we have to decide what’s good or bad, true or false, when we, too, have to define where we stand theologically on issues like religious and cultural diversity. Many sources they are, not one—(thank goodness!). Those *sources* include: direct spiritual experience, prophetic women and men, wisdom from the world’s religions, our Jewish and Christian roots, humanist and earth based teachings—these are the sources of our religion.

And the *criteria* that enable us to discern, judge, speak and act in ways that are consistent with our values; that place us deep along that continuum where we recognize the humanity of others fully; that help us cut through the b.s., the lies, the prejudices out there, in here, to which we too can be susceptible? Listen!—that which renews the spirit and upholds life; which challenges powers and structures of evil with justice and compassion; that inspires our ethical and spiritual life with love for our neighbor; which counsels us to listen to reason and the results of science; that instructs us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

When we hear others making questionable claims about another religious or cultural group and civilizations at war, when those feelings rise within us—run them through the gauntlet of these Unitarian criteria: do they jive with reason, do they uphold life, do they challenge power with justice and compassion, are they in harmony with nature, do they promote love of our neighbour?

May we be the kind of active citizens who value an open, diverse society and are willing to go toe-to-toe with those who threaten it. May we learn more about other religions—and those places in scripture and tradition that assert love of neighbour and the value of diversity as the very essence, the heart and soul of their faith.

And let us truly value and celebrate the place where our own Unitarianism provokes and inspires us to go in our life's journey. If we do, we may overcome a certain blindness in the human condition; overcome it, and thus recognize the full humanity of our neighbours. It's a mystic occupation, an occupation profoundly within our power—one that will change the usual standards of human values for the better in the twinkling of an eye. (see William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *The Heart of William James*, ed. Robert Richardson, 2011, pp. 145-63)

Barbaric as well, the savage cuts in the UK to social services, the closing down of youth clubs, the branding of urban youth as feral thugs, the abandoning of children and families to housing ghettos, poor, underfunded schools, and a future without meaningful work. Two months ago, though in no way do I condone it, we saw consequences in the fires, theft and mayhem in the streets of England.

Make it very clear that there are types of diversity where there is no cause to celebrate whatsoever--rich and poor. If you're poor, can't find meaningful work and a living wage, access to quality education, housing, etc., then having your "culture, your race, your gender, and sexual orientation respected" is cold comfort indeed. In fact, it can be a dodge from the truly meaningful, and hard work of securing equality, of combating immiserating poverty—and that, I think, has been a huge problem on the left.

Being a believer does not mean that your other identities need to disappear and that you cease to be a citizen of a country and respect and keep its laws. Contrary to what fundamentalists claim, religion does not govern the whole of existence. And unlike what some so-called media experts claim, Muslims are not an exceptional species in the human race, whose every move is governed by their religious affiliation. "Moral and religious norms do not mechanically engender acts." Throughout history, the citizens of Muslim countries have, like everyone else, obeyed the very diverse laws of the countries they live in. So to begin with, we need to stop thinking, if we do, that the Quran provides anyone with the sole key to explaining the behavior of today's Muslims. This obviously does not stop us from asking what the message of the Q actually is. But the answer is far from simple. Not only are there statements in the Q that lead in different directions, as a consequence, there are and have been very diverse schools

of thought in Islam that teach different interpretations and applications of Quranic teachings—just as in Christianity.

Let me take just a couple of examples: though a recurrent statement in the Q is that the revelation in the text is complete and leaves nothing unsaid, it never mentions a caliphate—one of bin Laden’s obsessions—or any kind of Islamic state. “Subsequent state structures have no basis in the Q, but are the work of governments pursuing their own interests.” (TT 159-61)

“Your mission is not to force them into your faith.” (50:45)

“You are here merely to remind them of the word of God. You have no authority to enforce over them.” (88: 21-2) It is Khomeini and bin Laden who impose an unusual reading of the text, treating the Q as if it were the Constitution of a modern state.

Let me go a bit further with this to assert that not only did Muhammad require the separation of the political and the religious, the Quran acknowledges and accepts the plurality of peoples and the distinction between what is just in the here and now and that which conforms with the faith in our relations to the divine.