

“What Keeps Us Separated?”

February 24, 2008

The Reading

The reading is from the book titled *The Faith Club*, which was the “One Read Program” sponsored by the church this winter. It is an accounting of how three women came to understand each other’s faith tradition, and at the same time, deepening their own faith. It is written by Ranya Idliby, a Muslim, Suzanne Oliver, a Christian, and Priscilla Warner, a Jew. The reading is from Chapter Eight, titled “Ranya’s Madrassah.” It is a conversation between Ranya, the Muslim, and Priscilla, the Jew.

Here begins the reading.

PRISCILLA: Ranya, I know that you’ve said the Muslim God is a universal God, the same God as the Jewish God, the Christian God. But when I go out into the world I find that people don’t really believe that . . . . What do I say to people who cite suicide bombers as proof that Islam is a violent religion spread through war?

RANYA: Nowhere in the Quran does it say kill and you shall be rewarded. Dying in the name of religion is not unique to Islam. Christianity is full of examples of people who were martyred in the name of their religion. Some of those people, in fact, are considered saints. The Tamils in Sri Lanka blow themselves up for their cause. Buddhist monks burn themselves up in protest of war. But we all should recognize that when religion is used as a rationale for aggression, a tactic of war, or to justify a promise of land, then it is politicized religion. It becomes a human ideology that has nothing to do with Godly values. That doesn’t excuse all this craziness, but it is not anything particular or exclusive to Islam.

PRISCILLA: And the word “jihad” is terrifying to most people. What exactly is jihad?

RANYA: Jihad has more than one meaning. The first is the idea of the inner struggle to be a better Muslim, considering to be the greater and more important jihad. The second meaning refers to the lesser jihad, which is the idea of holy war in defense of the faith, especially when mortal danger is perceived. But this “jihad against infidels” demonstrated in the recent horrific terrorist attacks is not only crazy, but a terribly faulty reading of Islam. By Islam’s definition, Christians and Jews are “people of the book” and therefore not infidels.

PRISCILLA: What about the religious schools, the madrassahs, that are teaching Holy War?

RANYA: There are madrassahs out there. But to understand the violence that is being preached there you have to look beyond the holy text. Most people would find it absurd to look at the roots of the Spanish Inquisition exclusively through references to the Bible. Most would agree that the persecution had a lot more to do with human power and ambition than the Christian message. And, by the way, few would condemn Judaism as an inherently aggressive and expansive territorial religion on the grounds that some have taken the Old Testament’s promise of land to its militant conclusion (pp. 109-110).

Here ends the reading.

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by  
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The One Read Team asked if I couldn't somehow address the issues raised in the “One Read” book titled *The Faith Club*. The “One Read Program” is a process of selecting one book for the members and friends of the church to read who wish to participate. This is followed by a series of open conversations about the book facilitated by the One Read Team. I'm certain a number of you read the book and participated in the three Faith Club Discussion Groups over the past weeks. For those who haven't read the book, it is a fascinating process of three women coming to terms with their stereotypes of each other and how their respective faiths were subsequently strengthened. Each woman was an author of children's books. Priscilla is Jewish, Suzanne a Christian and Ranya, Muslim. They came together for a joint project of writing one book that revealed the founders of the three faith traditions – Jewish, Christian and Islam. To their surprise, the first drafts for each founder – Moses, Jesus and Muhammad – were fraught with varying degrees of loaded language and imagery of the other traditions which were taken for granted by each author. Before any substantial writing could occur, each had to sort out the ideas carried about the other traditions. The remainder of the book tells the story of how each one came to terms with their respective stereotypes. The story also reveals how each one came to better appreciate their respective faith tradition. In my reading of the book, there are three themes: relationship, identity and self-differentiation.

What few comments I've received from the follow-up conversations facilitated by the One Read Team, many were impressed with how the three came together to better understand each other's faith and better understand each one's faith. Most readers seemed to appreciate the opportunity for a better understanding of Islam. It seems most felt they already have a handle on Christianity and the Jewish tradition. That may or may not be true. There are many stereotypes floating around about those two traditions, too. Certainly our social engagements are more prominently with Christians and Jews, if we even know that. Few of us have much of an opportunity to knowingly be continuously engaged with a Muslim. Besides, most of the media has its own take on what is the basis of Islam. Politicians also cast a certain image of what is a Muslim. The terrorists have the upper hand in forging the popular image of Islam. We have on more than one occasion heard the reference to “Islamofascists” as a means of identifying the source of terror in the world. This term couples the religious with the political aspect, which only confuses the issue. It is also a term to continue to promote fear and suspicion, since we don't hear of Christo-fascists or Judao-fascists or even atheist-fascists. Due to the geo-political region of conflict and the self-proclamations of the antagonists, it is suggested we conflate the complex nature of the issues into a single target – extremist Islam.

The geo-political nature of the issue is the greatest impediment to a genuine conversation toward understanding. This was the nature of the dilemma between Priscilla and Ranya. While Priscilla is an American Jew by birth, Ranya, who considers herself an American Muslim, was a displaced Palestinian Arab. Therein was the rub. The issue of the rights of Jews in the nation of Israel versus the rights of Palestinians in Palestine overshadowed the initial religious understanding. In fact, the tension between

the two wasn't about religion at all. It was entirely geo-political. The gerrymandering of the Middle East territory by imperialist European powers as far back as the First World War bred trial and suffering to many. The horror of the Holocaust had a good measure in the United Nations establishing the nation of Israel in 1948. This exacerbated an already tense region. While Priscilla and Ranya were dealing with the geo-political issues, Priscilla and Suzanne were dealing indirectly with the Holocaust.

Suzanne's initial storybook draft revealed the typical blind spot of Christians – that of the ignorance of the suffering of Jews at the hands of Christians. The pogroms and persecutions of Jews over the centuries were intensified by the Holocaust. No longer could the rabbis quell the anxiety built over the centuries with the promise of the Messiah. With the Holocaust, there was no Messiah: nor for many Jews will there be a Messiah in the future. The raw call is “Never again,” for each Jew to be ever vigilant to the subversive threats to Jewish identity and freedom. Suzanne with her apparent naiveté opened Priscilla's wound. Examples of such naiveté are rife. Such innocent terms as “Old Testament” and “New Testament” are loaded with anti-Jewish, if not anti-Semitic overtones. Clearly implicated in these terms is that the Jewish faith tradition is “old” and outmoded, no longer a viable message, because there is a “new” message that supercedes it. Inherent in the terms for the Jew is the threat of extinction. Today, there are Christians who support the nation of Israel, not because of altruism. The hope of these Christians is that the conflict with Palestinians and Muslims will escalate. With that the hope is for the end times, Armageddon to occur, and the conversion of not only Jews, but also Muslims to Christianity. To the extent Priscilla and Ranya understood this, Suzanne would, as a Christian be a threat to them.

Suzanne and Ranya's issues entailed how to circumvent the popular image of Islam held by Christians. The political and media purveyors of fear and anxiety have a grip on the popular notions of Islam. Ranya has to convince Suzanne there are differing ways of expressing Islam. Although the issue between the two isn't so much extinction, it does have to do with the finality of revelation. I ran across this when I was on the recent Jesus panel earlier this month. The main dispute between the Christian and Muslim on the panel was over the sealing of revelation. Revelation was sealed by Christ for the Christian, as found in the Gospels and other writings. For the Muslim revelation was sealed by Mohammad receiving the Qur'an. That issue of final revelation was more of a problem with Suzanne than with Ranya. For Ranya, she understood God to be universal, not specific. Even the Trinity that was vaguely held by Suzanne was not too much of an issue.

Priscilla was not immune to the fearful way Islam is presented in the country. With the added geo-political dimension, she also needed some confirmation from Ranya what it meant to be a Muslim. The dialog in the reading is one of many that aimed at clearing the religious air between the three. Of the three, Suzanne was the more pious or devout, regularly attending church, a liberal Episcopalian congregation. Priscilla rarely attended synagogue, and Ranya never attended mosque. Ironically, Suzanne had the greater problem. She had to get past the exclusivist overtones of Christianity in order to be in touch with her faith and authentically join in the dialog. Priscilla's Jewish understanding never had that capacity of exclusion, even though the other two thought being of the “chosen people,” such would be the case. For Priscilla the issue of “chosen” was not for exclusion, but for identity. Ranya maintained her grasp of a universal God, to be expressed in many ways. In the end, Priscilla obtained a closer relation with her rabbi. Ranya found an imam that was not a threat to her understanding of Islam. And Suzanne became more at ease, although still with some doubts, about her faith. She was greatly relieved when her rector said, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's certainty. It's okay to have doubt, everyone does” (pg. 204). The theme of relationship is expressed in the willingness of the three to listen to

each other, even attend each other's place of worship. Identity was clarified through this intense relationship and dialog. That willingness to be exposed to the other required a measure of self-differentiation. That self-awareness means that one is secure with one's identity as singular and unique, yet not threatened by other's identities and uniqueness. As one self-differentiated, one does not give up one's identity in order to be in authentic relationship with another.

The story of the Faith Club is one in the private realm as affected by the public realm. Although the three found a pathway to resolve their initial misunderstandings, what about the public realm? Is there a pathway available for a similar understanding? The Faith Club is a private venture into identity, relationship and self-differentiation: the attempt by Muslims, Christians and Jews to open a dialog is a public venture that is hopefully not so emotionally charged. Such an attempt is in some quarters underway. But there is yet a lot of resistance.

I was sent an email that gave an account of a Christian witnessing a presentation by a panel consisting of a Roman Catholic, Protestant and Muslim, who was identified as an imam. After the respective presentations, the Christian asked the imam this question, "Please, correct me if I'm wrong, but I understand that most Imams and Clerics of Islam have declared a holy jihad . . . against the Infidels of the world and, that by killing an infidel, . . . they are assured a place in heaven . . ." Now, according to this Christian, the imam said he was correct. From that the Christian built an argument that we have an either/or choice between Allah or Christ. In the first place, opening a question with "Tell me if I'm wrong" implies that I am right and you must defend yourself – and you better do a damned good job of it! The other misrepresentation of fact is the phrase "most imams and clerics" concur with the questioner's position. So, here we have an example of the kind of stereotyping the three women had about each other. I have no idea of the qualifications of either the imam or the questioning Christian. But I do know that self-selected individuals cannot represent whole bodies of people.

Last October a group of 138 prominent Muslims wrote an open letter to several world Christian leaders. Imams, ayatollahs, grand muftis, sheikhs and scholars expressing an urgent need for open dialog signed the 29-page letter. Those familiar with Islam are assured the signatories represent authorities in all major schools of Islamic thought and influential grass-roots scholars. Several prominent Christian leaders and institutions welcomed the letter. The Vatican, however, remains cautious. How this dialog will proceed remains to be seen. The main point is to open the conversation on the basis of trust. The intent of the letter is religious: to open the conversation about what was titled as "A Common Word Between Us and You." Yet, there are those who cannot disconnect the religious with the political. This was Ranya's major problem with both Suzanne and Priscilla. One such critic of the open letter in an op-ed dismissed the letter because it did not address the political issues facing the Middle East and the world. This writer used the same strategy of fear and anxiety to maintain an arrogant aura of supremacy and self-satisfaction. Just as the social policy rhetoric of the Religious Right conservatives, known as theocons, overshadows the other two components of the Republican Party today – the neo-conservatives over issues of foreign policy and the radical anti-taxers – thereby confusing the lines between religion and politics, so, too, are the lines blurred with the anti-West rhetoric coming from those who proclaim themselves as Muslim. As Ranya says in the reading;

But we all should recognize that when religion is used as a rationale for aggression, a tactic of war, or to justify a promise of land, then it is politicized religion. It becomes a human ideology that has nothing to with Godly values.

Ranya's argument as a Muslim is that such terrorist action and words are political, not religious.

It is to be granted there is tension within the Muslim world when one perceives an attempt to liberalize Islam within the American and western context. Perhaps one social dynamic is that Muslims are no longer "ghettoized" in the Middle East, so may be facing a similar identity tension faced by the Jews after social and political freedom granted in Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century. From that experience of the Jews, we saw through the course of the later 19<sup>th</sup>-century the development of less orthodox Jewish practice. Maybe some Muslims who migrated to the west were so disconnected with the tradition that they promoted a private faith and ritual, or gave up entirely. In the case of Ranya, she privately maintained her understanding of the Muslim faith and practice as handed down by her family. She decided not to cover her head when in public. In both the private and public spheres, the question remains, "How to be a Muslim in the West and America?"

Some Muslim critics of their own faith lay considerable argument against the Wahhabi renewal trend begun in what is now Saudi Arabia nearly two hundred years ago. One reformer suggests the attire required for Muslim women is an expression of Arabic life-styles, not an edict from the Qur'an. In one dialog, Ranya brought up the issue of wonton following of non-essential rules;

That is only because people don't recognize that pluralistic possibilities and flexibility can exist within Islam as they do in Judaism and Christianity . . . . Muslims are denied this plurality both by those extreme, literal Muslims who claim exclusive rights and ownership of the religion and by those on the outside who validate such claims because they accept them as the authentic, true voice of Islam . . . (pg. 169).

There will always be those who believe faith is a matter of certainty. Whether they are given the authority and power to exercise that view upon everyone else is more of a political issue rather than a religious one. Let us hope there can be more Faith Clubs established to open necessary conversations among individuals. Let us hope religious leaders can come together in the same spirit as the Faith Club. We, as Unitarian Universalists, will have a role in showing how diversity of faith and practice can bring people together rather than to separate them.

Amen.