

The Call of Martyrdom

In our Unitarian Universalist Sunday Schools, we teach about the life and death of Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician who became embroiled in the theological disputations of 16th century Europe. Servetus objected to the doctrine of the trinity, declaring that Jesus was the son of the Eternal God rather than the Eternal Son of God. He wrote several books setting forth his anti-Trinitarian views, seeking to restore Christianity to what he believed were its authentic origins. He believed the doctrine of the trinity was not to be found in scripture and was leading away from belief in One Eternal God. His work came to the attention of the great Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, who condemned his ideas as heresy. Servetus's first books were published in 1531, and during the next twenty years, he and John Calvin developed a very hostile relationship. Servetus so annoyed Calvin that Calvin declared should Servetus ever come to Geneva, he would not leave alive.

Why, therefore, Servetus would choose to attend a service at which John Calvin was preaching is unclear. But he did in August of 1553, was quickly recognized and arrested after the service. At the trial he was found guilty of spreading heresy and sentenced to death by burning. On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake, with what was thought to be the last copy of his book tied to his knees. The title of the book was "On the Errors of the Doctrine of the Trinity." His dying words were "Jesus, son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me." To the end he refused to use the Trinitarian term, "the eternal Son of God." Servetus was thus declared by the Unitarians to be our first martyr and we teach of his steadfast dedication to his truth in our Sunday Schools. We also teach that he was an important figure in the development of freedom of religion. That's the version I heard in Unitarian churches in my thirties. In my early forties, embarking on education for ministry, I sat in a class on church history in a Methodist university and heard a very different version of the story of Michael Servetus.

There, Servetus was described as a misguided fool, a sort of gnat which annoyed Calvin, who was attempting to consolidate his power in Geneva. Our textbook explained that Calvin even showed his humanity by trying to have Servetus's manner of execution changed from burning to beheading. (How kind!) For his efforts, Calvin was rebuked for "undue leniency." Shortly after the execution of Servetus, Calvin published his "Defense of the Orthodox Faith, in which he declared that in cases of heresy the glory of God must be maintained regardless of all feelings of humanity." Calvin "received congratulations and applause from all quarters for execution of the arch heretic." (Christianity, A Social and Cultural History, Howard Clark Kee, et al, page 382)

We've all heard the expression, "One man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter." That's a statement which belies what philosophers call a constructionist epistemology. It's a big word which says that what we know, at least about the non-material world, is dependent on a "knowledge community," a group of people who agree on the truth. We socially

construct social reality. The arguments continue on how much and how we construct truth about material reality. When in our reading, we are asked to make meaning of the lives of soldiers who have died, we are being asked to construct a story about their deaths; and it is so dependent on our points of view.

Last year, a soldier from our area was killed in Iraq. The headline of the newspaper article describing his funeral said, "Priest declares soldier died for peace." I cringed. Having been unconvinced of the rightness of the war from the beginning, I was not sure that I could tell that story about the soldier's death. I could tell the story that the soldier gave his life honorably for his country. But it's not quite the same story.

Was Michael Servetus a hero and a martyr? Or a fool? Well, which story do you buy into? (Maybe both). Like all cultures, we tell the story of our martyr in order to create disciples of the faith. The implied message is "Be strong like Michael Servetus to defend the truth you know."

But from our vantage point, four hundred years later, it is very difficult to enter a pre-enlightenment mindset and understand why people would kill one another over whether Jesus existed eternally with God or whether he was created by God, or whether infants should be baptized immediately after birth or as adults, when they could understand its meaning. But for those living in 16th century Europe, truth and meaning of their lives was at stake.

In his 2007 book, **Faith, Reason and Jihadism**, George Weigel wrote, ". . . for the overwhelming majority of humanity, religious conviction provides the story line through which life's meaning is read. . ." (page 14) Victor Frankel told us after surviving the Holocaust that meaning is the one thing we humans cannot live without; but meaning is not "given" to us. We construct or create meaning. We are the meaning makers.

I am enough of a mystic to hope that there is a "spirit overseeing all" which leads us toward the good, but at the very least, we are co-creators with that spirit. We create meaning through the stories we tell, the narratives we construct about how we got here, how we are live while we are here, and what happens to us after death. Religion has been the primary source of those stories for most of human history. Only in the last couple of hundred years have we attempted to construct that meaning separate from its religious roots. Weigel believes we are being dangerously naïve not to realize and acknowledge the religious roots of the conflict between radical Islamists and the West. It is starkly apparent in the documents which are used to justify what are called "martyr operations," the use of suicide bombers to destroy those perceived to be the enemies of radical Islam. It was painful watching the news these last few days as we attempt to understand the mind of Nidal Hasan, the psychiatrist soldier who shot and killed 13 people and wounded another thirty at Fort Hood in Texas on Thursday. Before he began shooting, Hasan is said to have stood on a desk and called out

Allah Akbar, God is great, a clue that perhaps he was seeing himself as taking part in what Islamists now call “martyr” operations. In the coming days and weeks, I’m sure we’ll learn more of the storyline he was living. I suspect he had competing stories in his mind, and it all became too much to comprehend.

We don’t hear a lot these days about Christian or Jewish martyrs. Most of them lived and died in the distant past. But Islamic martyrs are constantly in the news, largely because of the use of suicide bombers. The language is powerful, because it creates the frame through which the acts are judged. From our frame of reference, these are “suicide bombers.” Israelis capture another meaning when they contend they should be spoken of not as suicide bombers, but as “homicide” bombers. Radical Islamists object to the term “suicide” bombers because suicide is explicitly forbidden in Islam. Until recently, suicide rates were lower among Muslims than other religious groups, probably because of the strong prohibition.

One major difference between Christian martyrs and the recent spate of Islamic martyrs is that Christian martyrs died alone. At least in the early years, most were killed by the Romans after refusing to renounce Christianity and worship the Roman gods. But they did not take their own lives, nor the lives of others. They died alone. With the suicide bombers of today, we are horrified because the would-be-martyrs are not dying alone, but taking with them what we consider to be “innocent bystanders.” That is why we were so horrified by the events of 9/11. Our sense of just war does not allow for random killing of non-combatants, although we sometimes fudge it, referring to innocent bystanders as “collateral damage.”

But radical Islamists are telling themselves a different story. We have competing narratives. Until we listen to their story, we will not understand why they are doing what they are doing. Understanding the story may not change how we respond, but it may change how we feel about our response. The story being lived out by radical Islamists is that they are being humiliated and oppressed by Western powers, and that there are no innocent bystanders. By paying taxes to our government, in their minds we are guilty and deserve to be killed. With our emphasis on individualism, that is a hard storyline for us to embrace.

The storyline of the martyr is similar whether in Judaism or Christianity or Islam. The martyr stands fast in allegiance to his god in the face of official demands to betray the allegiance or die. The martyr consciously chooses death. In Judaism, a story found in 4 Maccabees is often cited as a foundational story of martyrdom. In that story the elderly priest Eleazar is tortured and killed by the Romans for refusing to eat the pork they set in front of him. In the midst of his torture, he cried out “O children of Abraham, die nobly for your religion!” Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death for alleged blasphemy “against Moses and God.” Ultimately, all but two of the original apostles of Jesus were martyred, and through the years tens of thousands of Christians have died

for their faith. Recently, Islamic martyrs have become familiar to us. However, Muslims trace their martyrology to the earliest days of their faith, when warring groups fought over who should lead after Mohammed's death.

Religious martyrdom consistently results in the forgiveness of sins and achievement of a higher level or expedited journey to heaven or paradise in the afterlife. As the Jewish martyr Eleazar died, he spoke to God, "You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments for the sake of the law. Be merciful to your people and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs." (4 Maccabees 6:28-29)

Here we have the idea of vicarious atonement. Eleazar's death will atone for the sins of his people as well as himself. For much of Christendom, Christ was the original martyr. His death functioned similarly to Eleazar's. Jesus' blood was also shed that our sins might be forgiven. In the martyr operations of radical Islam today, the sins of the martyr are thought to be forgiven because his activities at the time of death are for the glory of Allah and Islam. The same idea is present in the Hindu world today in the martyrdom of women in Sri Lanka. Rape victims especially, are encouraged to martyr themselves as a means of redemption. There is no future for them after rape. Becoming a martyr through suicide will ensure redemption.

In a recent article in the Christian Century magazine, editors noted that "early church leaders warned Christians not to seek martyrdom. . . that it was preferable to escape to a neighboring town in order to avoid such a death. Only if one is cornered and required to renounce the faith should one accept martyrdom." (April 18, 2006, page 5) "Seeking martyrdom," they say, "can be a form of self-glorification," and "declaring someone a martyr can be tantamount to calling for revenge – another form of violence." Instead, they said, we should follow the example of Jesus, who "asked for forgiveness for his executioners."

The original meaning of the word martyr is in "to bear witness." Throughout world history, as various cultures have developed stories about their origins, each culture has understandably believed its story to be THE story of human kind. But now we live in a multicultural world, where we know that the competing stories cannot all be exclusively true. What are we to do? If we have been told that our culture or religion's story is the one true way, we can try to hang on to it in the face of evidence to the contrary, and try to obliterate those who tell another story. Or, we could tell ourselves that truth is not static, that it is ever evolving, and that we must weave a new story, a new meaning for humanity. That is the faith of Unitarian Universalism. We, like the Sikhs and Baha'i before us, are the religious syncretists. We believe that a new story can be woven from the various accounts. We sift through the many stories of the world and look for common threads, as we are doing today. Ah, isn't it interesting that most cultures have martyrs? Isn't it sad, that so many people are still dying for beliefs. Often they

are competing beliefs in the sense that each claims to have the whole truth. Can we possibly weave a new story where martyrdom won't be necessary?

What would such a story look like? The first thing I would give up in my story of humanity without the need for martyrs would be speculation about the afterlife. That, too, is a common thread through the story of martyrs. Martyrs overcome their fear of death by believing that God will somehow save them in the afterlife. I would focus on this life and what we can know about it and what makes humans thrive. How can we best, as the Deuteronomist exhorted us, "Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live?" (chapter 30, verse, 19)

My story would take in all that science can tell us about how humans came to be, and how we humans can be happy and thrive. There are common needs among humans. We all have basic physical, survival needs; we need food and shelter and clothing and health care. We want to be free to learn, and create beauty and prosper economically, free to love whom we will, free to elect our own leaders, free to worship, free to make music and dance. We want to be free from fear. All of us love our children and our grandchildren. We mourn when we lose those we love.

I would give up claims to one truth, one right way of doing things. Instead of insisting that the whole world be Muslim or Christian, I would tell the story that diversity is beautiful and wonderful. On my sabbatical trip last year the tour guide in Turkey announced to the group that Unitarians want to unify the world's religions and make them one. I told him later that I thought that was in error. While I look for and am delighted by common ideas underlying the world's religions, I celebrate the diverse forms in which those ideas are expressed through story and music and ritual. We are enriched by that diversity. I am not harmed when I read many different creation stories. I am not harmed by the fact that Charles Darwin's story of evolution counteracts the story in Genesis, or the Japanese story of the birth of the sun god. Instead, I am moved to wonder, believing that each account offers us some bit of truth about the human story.

Religion and politics are inevitably intertwined, because the religious stories are often the source of the values we seek to live out in our political lives. So, it's always an interesting, and probably unanswerable question – whether modern martyrdoms are more politically or theologically motivated. Theology is certainly being used to provide the underlying rationale for many instances of martyrdom. But we deceive ourselves if we think that just because we are not religious we do not ask or require death for ideas. Martin Luther King Jr is often considered a modern-day martyr. He knew of threats against his life, but chose not to stop speaking out for equality. But he was martyred not so much for his strictly religious idea, but for his political ideas, that all of us, regardless of skin color, should be treated equally. Matthew Shepherd, the gay man murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, is sometimes described as a martyr of the gay community. All of our lives are given for something, whether consciously or not. That

for which we are willing to die also tells us that for which we are living. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “A man will worship something, and what we are worshipping, we are becoming.” He was encouraging us to become conscious of that which we are worshipping -- that which we are becoming. We can become increasingly conscious, not by suppressing or destroying competing narratives, but by hearing them, and examining them, reflecting on them, and using them to weave a new story.

In our world, it is easy to be unconsciously martyred. Sometimes fathers and mothers are martyred by the idea of unending consumption. We work many long hours to earn money to buy ever more things. Sometimes we are martyrs to our jobs because we fear we have no worth without them. Some of us are martyrs to situations life hands us, mentally-ill relatives, or handicapped children. Many of our soldiers and veterans are martyrs to our ideas of democracy and America’s role in the world.

I do not believe we will ever be able to create a world where the call to martyrdom will disappear completely. There will always be evil to be overcome, injustices to be righted. There will always be competing narratives. But if we can tell ourselves a story about diversity of cultures being enriching rather than threatening, we have a chance of reducing the number of those who must die for ideas.

Another part of reducing martyrdom is a commitment to non-violence, to solving our differences through dialog. However, that takes two willing partners, with minds and hearts open enough to hear one another’s stories, to not be frightened by competing narratives. It also takes a willingness to acknowledge our own errors and injustices and a willingness to make peace through creating justice. “If you want peace, work for justice,” as the bumper sticker says.

In 1544, nine years before the execution of Michael Servetus, Sebastian Castellio, a Genevan schoolmaster who had been forced out of Geneva by John Calvin, wrote a book, **Concerning Heretics, Whether They are to Be Persecuted**. Castellio said, “To burn a heretic is not to defend a doctrine, but to kill a man.”

May we have the courage to value life as much as ideas.

Rev. Linda Hoddy
November 8, 2009
Saratoga Spring, NY

“And the Buddhists have an expression, “The Mind is all.”

Prayer – by Barbara Pescan

Spirit of Life

whom we have called by many names
in thanksgiving and in anguish—
Bless the poets and those who mourn
Send peace for the soldiers who did not make the wars
but whose lives were consumed by them
Let strong trees grow above graves far from home
Breathe through the arms of their branches
The earth will swallow your tears while the dead sing
“No more, never again, remember me.”
For the wounded ones, and those who received them back,
let there be someone ready when the memories come
when the scars pull and the buried metal moves
and forgiveness for those of us who were not there
for our ignorance.
And in us, veterans in a forest of a thousand fallen promises,
let new leaves of protest grow on our stumps.
Give us courage to answer the cry of humanity’s pain
And with our bare hands, out of full hearts,
with all our intelligence
let us create the peace.

Source: Morning Watch - Skinner House Books 1999

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BENEDICTION

“May we have the faith in life to do wise planting,
That the generations to come may reap ever more abundantly than we.”
May we plant a vision which values human beings
more than ideology or religious doctrine.

“May we be bold in bringing to fruition the golden dreams of human kinship
and justice.

This we ask :

That the fields of promise become fields of reality.”

Quotation from V. Emil Gudmundson