

“A Response to Religious Hatred”
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On June 10, a guard at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., was shot by an 88-year-old white supremacist. More than 60 years after the end of the Holocaust, here was a man enacting the beliefs that created it. Here was a man placing Jews as the objects of hate, and taking action on his belief. How do we explain this?

On June 12, the PBS program, Religion and Ethics, interviewed Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, rabbi of Ohev Sholom, the oldest Orthodox synagogue in Washington. They ask him, “How do you explain to yourself and to your children and to your congregation what happened at the museum?”

Herzfeld says, “Well, sometimes there are acts that have no explanation, that are so difficult to understand. But we have to try to explain. When I heard about it I was devastated”, he said, “but I thought I could keep this from my children. And we have five children – we are blessed by God – and the oldest is nine. And we were sitting at the table last night, and I thought they didn't know about it, and one of my children said, 'Oh yeah, we know about the shooting.' And my jaw dropped open. And they wanted to know how something like this could happen.”

The rabbi describes where we all are, I think, when confronted with something so sorrowful as a murder based on religion. The same goes for the murder of Dr. George Tiller, the doctor who spent his career providing abortions for women at great personal risk. It happened as he was handing out programs in his Lutheran Church on Sunday morning. It was a murder of a Christian committed by a Christian acting in the name of the God they both worshipped.

And yet it is not really unusual. In Nigeria, for example, the population is split fairly evenly between Muslims in the North and Christians in the South. Since 1990, there have been 20,000 Nigerians, both Muslim and Christian, killed by one religion trying to gain the majority over the other. These murders have been supported by American collection plates and Saudi petro dollars. (“In God's Name”, special report in The Economist, November 3, 2007) When I visited Israel, I was struck by the many tour buses filled with Nigerians, expressing heartfelt devotion at all the Christian sites honoring the life of Jesus. I learned that their trips to Israel were sponsored by people who wanted to lock them in for the Christian side and prevent them from becoming Muslim. And then of course there are the long, weary battles between Palestinians and Israelis, and the disturbing news that the end of the troubles between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland isn't quite over. Most recently, there are the brutal crackdowns

against the protesters in Iran. The orders were delivered by a religious leader in a sermon, heard in the context of worship. Religiously justified hatred is old, and its violence common. As Maya Angelou once wrote, “millions of ourselves have murdered millions of ourselves.” In the name of God.

But even knowing how old and commonplace this is, I found the news about Dr. Tiller and the Holocaust museum guard especially heart-breaking. Perhaps because they were so personal, so individual. They took place in ordinary places, places where any of us could have been. And it is fresh news about ourselves as a species that we would rather not have learned. Just as the rabbi wanted to protect his children from knowing, so would we want to protect our children – and ourselves - from it. And we cannot. As Lucille Clifton said, we are “captured by history” and “required to view it together under a gathering sky”. And like the rabbi's children, we want to know why. We cannot explain it, the rabbi said, and yet we need to try.

So what did Rabbi Herzfeld tell his children? I find his answer a helpful place for us to begin. “Well”, he said to them, “sometimes there are just people who are wicked. You know, like sometimes you'll see a kid in school who's just being mean for no reason. Well, if we multiply that by so much, there's some people who are so wicked in the world and there's no way to understand it. But that means we have a job to do, and our job, I said to my children, is to reach out and be extra nice to people – especially people we don't know, especially people who are different... And no matter what religion you are, you are a child of God.” (PBS Religion and Ethics, June 12, 2009)

It's simple advice. In the face of inexplicable evil, we must reach out to strangers, and to people who are not like ourselves. We must counter the force of hate with the force of love for all the children of God. That is basically the message of my sermon; it more or less sums up my answer. So now if you need a break, if you'd like to daydream awhile, or think about what you're going to buy at the grocery store after church, you're free to do that. And for those who'd really like their money's worth from the sermon, of course there's more. You may continue to meditate with me on this topic.

I especially appreciate Shmuel Herzfeld's comments as an Orthodox rabbi speaking out for religious tolerance across difference. He voiced deep appreciation for the Muslims and Christians who joined his congregation outside the museum in a vigil for the slain guard. Since Orthodox Judaism has often made exclusive claims to religious truth, his urging for his people, urging all of us, to see people of other faiths as equal children of God, is powerful. I would like to engage him about what he meant by 'wicked people', and whether or not he thought they too were children of God. But I was struck by the responsibility and risk he took as a religious leader.

Similarly, I was struck by an editorial I read in the Baltimore Sun, by Frank

Schaeffer, a former evangelical speaker and son of an even more famous evangelical preacher, Francis Schaeffer. He writes, “My late father and I share part of the blame for the murder of Dr. George Tiller, the abortion doctor gunned down on Sunday... In the late 1970s, my father,... along with Dr. C. Everett Koop (who soon became surgeon general in the Reagan administration) went on the road with me, taking the documentary anti-abortion film series I produced and directed to the evangelical public. The series and companion book eventually brought millions of heretofore nonpolitical evangelical Americans into the anti-abortion crusade. [We] advocated force if all other methods for rolling back the abortion ruling of Roe v. Wade failed. [We] compared America and its legalized abortion to Hitler's Germany and said that whatever tactics would have been morally justified in removing Hitler would be justified in trying to stop abortion.” (“We Who Sowed Hate Share Blame in Killing of Abortion Doctor”, editorial in the Baltimore Sun, June 2, 2009)

Frank Schaeffer left the religious right, and publicly repented of the politicized hatred he feels this movement sowed in America. He now believes some abortions should be legal. But he, like many moderates on this issue, find *late-term* abortions unacceptable, which Tiller specialized in. He stays critical of this practice, while condemning any violence against its practitioners. And this makes him unusual – someone who is trying to address people on both sides of the debate. He is trying to nudge us out of our bunker mentality, which allows the left and the right to demonize each other on this issue that defines hot-button issues. He may not be able to influence many on the right to take responsibility for the inflamed rhetoric on Fox News, (in fact, he gets a generous supply of hate mail from them for speaking out), but he is a surprisingly credible witness for compromise. I may still disagree with him on the abortion issue, and I do, but his heartfelt taking of responsibility got me to take him seriously.

What strikes me about both of these men's public statements is the way they take responsibility for the power of their own words. Neither of them is urging censorship, but a public insistence that people recognize their part in fostering hatred. Especially recognizing the power of hatred that is sown in a religious context. You do not find this if you read about the arguments in the Senate against including gays and lesbians in the already existing hate crimes laws. You will notice that so much of the pushback is being couched in religious terms. The most vocal critics are defending the free speech of conservative preachers to condemn homosexuality. And be free of the consequences of their faithful's actions in response.

Contrast this with Frank Schaeffer's statement about the relationship between his family's words and their consequences. He writes, “Like many writers of moral/political/religious theories, my father and I would have been shocked that someone took us at our word, walked into a Lutheran Church and pulled the trigger on

an abortionist. But even if the murderer never read Dad's or my words, we helped create the climate that made this murder likely to happen. In fact, it has happened before. In 1994, Dr. John Bayard Britton and one of his volunteer escorts were shot and killed outside an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida, by Paul Hill, a former minister and an avid follower of my father's." ("We Who Sowed Hate Share Blame in Killing of Abortion Doctor", editorial in the Baltimore Sun, June 2, 2009)

In both Shaeffer's and Herzfeld's statements, there is criticism of religious hatred while still claiming their own religious passion. So often I hear people wanting to do away with religion altogether in the face of such collective sorrow. "If that's religion, you can have it," some of us liberals say. We UUs speak with pride of the wide-open embrace of difference in our movement, our acceptance of each person wherever she is on her spiritual journey. But often we as congregations, and as individuals, operate at a cool remove from spirituality. We prefer head to heart, and it shows.

My colleague, the Rev. Victoria Weinstein, wrote about this in her blog, which inspired me to preach this sermon in the first place. She writes, "It's been so easy for religious liberals to point the finger [at religious hate crimes] and say 'There are the wages of dogmatism.' I agree. It's a fair response. I also wonder," she writes, "if that reaction is the only thing we have to offer... I don't believe – have never believed – that what will heal the world of hateful fundamentalisms is rationalism, but humility and reverence. I often feel that we're under the impression that a good dose of reading on the historical Jesus, Biblical criticism and other "rational" sources will cure any dogmatic mind of its delusions. Bah. Reverence, mystery, humility, service and love are the antidote. Not information."

As society became more and more secular throughout the 20th century, social theorists became more and more confident that religion would just become a weak force on the sidelines, if it existed at all. Remember the "God Is Dead" proclamations of the 1960s? Why did we need religion? Modern life brought a lot of exciting advances, advances in women's rights, in civil rights for many groups of people, in scientific innovations that gave us a greater sense of hope and understanding of the mysteries of existence. Unless you were a religious conservative. And then it was just plain terrifying.

Karen Armstrong, in her book, *The Battle for God*, summed up a six-volume treatise (thank you, Karen!) by Martin Marty and Scott Appleby on resurgence of fundamentalism in the world. The different varieties of fundamentalism – whether you are talking about Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or even Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, which have their own fundamentalist groups – all of them follow a basic pattern. They are all *embattled* forms of spirituality. Each form of fundamentalism emerged as a response to a perceived crisis. Each is engaged in conflict with an enemy

whose secularist policies and beliefs seem to threaten religion itself. So you can see this played out in the Jihad of fundamentalist Muslims against the west, as well as the Focus on the Family of the American religious right, as well as the Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel who believe God promised them the West Bank. Such fundamentalists see the world as a battle, not in political terms, but as a cosmic war between good and evil. To avoid contamination they withdraw from society to create a counter culture. Because – and this is perhaps the most important point – they fear annihilation. They feel a “terror of extinction”, Armstrong writes, “that secularists will wipe them out. It leads to separation, [sharply and absolutely] defined doctrines, barriers and borders.” She urges liberals and secularists to “try to appreciate the depths of the [fear]” that would inspire such behavior. “Try to understand *our own* aggressiveness and lack of respect for *them*,” she said. Try to do what any religion worth its salt should urge us to do – try to show humility for our own limitations, and compassion. (Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*)

We must also try to understand the powerful appeal of fundamentalist groups to our desire to belong, and the attractiveness of a heartfelt invitation. When I was a young teenager, as many of you know, I was part of a fundamentalist church. I was a born-again Christian. The people in my church were some of the most loving, generous, go-out-of-their-way-for-you types of people I have ever met. And boy, I needed it. My mother had just died, my family was falling apart and my home was full of stress. School offered no respite. I was painfully shy and hated junior high. And the people of that church invited me in. They wanted to be my friend. When I talk to UUs about them, I say, when I was hurting and alone they invited me to their church. Where were *you* people? It wasn't all about quotas and winning more converts for “their side”. They cared about me – and a 13-year-old has a highly developed detection system for whether or not people really care.

They spoke to my fearful and lonely heart with love. I didn't fully understand the conditions they placed on this love – conditions of belief, a strict discouragement of questioning. I knew nothing of the hatred being sowed concurrently at that very moment in conservative churches – this was the 70s, the time in which much of the politicizing and public embattlement mentality was forming. I wouldn't fully appreciate the constrictions of women's roles, the condemnation of gays and lesbians, or abortions until much, much later.

But I did experience the urgency of battle that was fomented in me by belonging. I marked myself by carrying the biggest Bible I could find to school, and wearing the biggest cross I could find. (I recently ran across a photograph of myself wearing this thing – it truly was the size of a pork chop.) I had a taste of how easily one could become a little Christian soldier and feel good about it. But not everyone in my church succumbed to this sense of embattlement. I now have a greater appreciation for the

many, many adults in my church who urged me to love people who were not “Christians” by my definition, and to stop marking myself for battle. To stop seeing religion in terms of “us” and “them”.

You see, it doesn't really go away when you become a liberal, When I served a small church in the town of Ludington, Michigan, I was given a great opportunity by the local paper to publicly define my faith. I was invited to write a guest commentary about my church. I wrote what I thought was a thoughtful description of our commitment to questioning, to the open mind, to diverse responses to the great theological questions. You know, all our good stuff. The newspaper editors wrote a headline for my column. They wrote, “Thinks Her Church Has Right Answer.” I was upset, and the editors couldn't understand why. Some of our members didn't understand why, either. “Do you think we have the WRONG answer?” they said.

Another story: I swear that whenever I set out to preach about something, the universe gives me an opportunity to see if I mean what I am about to say. A test drive, if you will. A friend of mine from the YMCA asked me if she could interview me for a paper she is writing for her seminary class. She is an Evangelical Christian, and a lovely woman. Someone who went out of her way to make me feel welcome as a newcomer. Still. She said that her assignment was to interview someone who is not a Christian. (She's Assembly of God, and saw Unitarian Universalism as a religion that embraced all world religions. True enough.) She wanted to share her faith with me and find out what I thought.

My meeting with her this week upped the ante, I must say. There we were, in my office, she sitting next to me on my love seat, asking me to read highlighted verses from her Bible, and asking me to say what I thought they meant. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." “The wages of sin is death.” My little forays into discussing the different meanings of the Greek words or the context of the verses didn't go anywhere. My descriptions of God that included the interdependent web, the divine spark in all people - zip. I was sad to have confirmed what I suspected going in: she really didn't want a dialogue. She was sort of hoping I'd see the light. That she would convince me of the truth – the exclusive truth – of her faith.

But then it dawned on me that I was hoping for the same thing! I knew that our beliefs about God, about sin and salvation, about Jesus, would all be pretty different. But I had underestimated another key difference between us. As a Unitarian Universalist, I see religions from a pluralist or egalitarian point of view, that all have some share of the answer. She holds a passionate belief in the power of one answer above all others. And I was pulling for pluralism! *Thinks her church has right answer, indeed.*

But God bless her. Every time I said what I know was heresy to her - she took it like a trouper. And when she told me about her beliefs in the saving power of Jesus' death and resurrection, I listened. It didn't get ugly. I doubt that either of us said all that we really thought. I think we agreed to be nice.

Well, you know what? After reading all week about religious violence, hooray for nice. In thinking about the troubles in Ireland, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the shootings of Dr. Tiller and the guard at the Holocaust museum, all done because people care more about themselves and their beliefs than other people, let's give nice a standing ovation. I have a renewed respect for the challenges of true interfaith dialogue. We ain't there yet. But we can care enough not to hurt one another. She's still my friend.

The world does tend to think of religious matters as a battlefield, of right and wrong answers, and we are part of this world. We are part of this world. This is why Paul's letter to the Romans includes the passage we read this morning. Jesus' message of service and humility held no place in being first or best. But it's a hard one to live up to. In its mildest form, it is the nearly irresistible human urge to define ourselves against the other, against those with whom we disagree. Its worst expression is violence and threats of violence. And Unitarian Universalists are not immune to either one.

I was once given a tour of 25 Beacon Street from John Buehrens, then president of the UUA. He confided to the group of us new ministers that he regularly received death threats as president of our movement. He added, "Death threats from *Unitarian Universalists*." I was shocked. Aren't you? It too is fresh news about ourselves we would rather not hear. I have a tough time explaining it. And I need to try.

Religion – or if you like, spirituality – is about something that is deep within us. Something precious and tender, yet very powerful. It is the part of ourselves that is also part of the divine. It's about our highest ideals that we can barely stand to hope will come true, but hope for, nonetheless. Unconditional love. The worth and dignity of all people. Meaning - underneath such vast emptiness. Peace. And the so-called 'organized religions' try to name those things and help us believe in those things – that they can exist in our lives and in the world, that we can see and touch them, and not just dream them. Even when the odds are looking pretty slim. The hope for them exists in each one of us, from the most outspoken atheist to the most outspoken believer.

It's the reason religion didn't just go away in the midst of our western enlightenment, and all our advances in science and technology. This religious hope is a core part of us, just as our sexuality is, just as our need for any transcendent experience. Which is why the whole "just say no" to drugs campaigns were such miserable failures, and why "abstinence only" sex education produced a whole lot of babies.

Like sexuality, like transcendent experience, religious hope has great power to disappoint, which not everyone can manage wisely or well. There are many ways not to handle it well. The only thing that helps is a thorough education of the heart, mind and spirit in the midst of people who love us. And that is what organized religion tries to give us. Very, very imperfectly. Even ours.

“Our job”, as Rabbi Herzfeld says, “is to reach out and be extra nice to people – especially people we don't know, especially people who are different... And no matter what religion you are, you are a child of God.” We often fail at this job. And we have to try. So may it be. Amen.