

## **“Why Islam Matters Today”**

A Sermon by the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister

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Islam matters today because this ancient religion is being hijacked by deadly terrorists and unless people speak out more directly Islam will continue to be degraded and the world will continue to pay the price in blood. Now, someone could ask, what business is it of mine to discuss these matters? I have to say that I've been appalled at the lack of response from moderate Muslims as the world has become terrorized by people in the name of their religion. You can bet that if a group of people calling themselves Unitarians were going around randomly killing children and blowing up schools and themselves and others, I'd waste no time publicly denouncing these people and their actions, and would in fact, organize a movement of fierce resistance. But, this is not happening and many top Muslim leaders today are quiet or even supportive of the terrorists. We have to ask why, why one of the world's great religions that is practiced by one fifth of the world's population has become the source of such incredible destruction. Let me say at the outset that I have a lot of respect for the religion of Islam and for the Muslims who I know in this community and around the world.

I have preached four sermons already from this pulpit on Islam. Each sermon pointed out wisdom I have found in its scriptures and history. I have made a point of illustrating many excellent contributions that Islamic people and Islamic societies have made to humanity. So I hope you'll hear my comments this morning not as a criticism of the religion of Islam, but rather as a plea for moderate forces within Islam to reclaim their religion. I will also offer words of advice to Unitarians about being religious in the era of Islamic terror.

My sermon is strongly influenced by the writing of Paul Berman and his book *Terror and Liberalism*. In it he argues that the current conflicts in the world have nothing to do with a clash of civilizations or religions. What is playing out on the world stage today is a continuation of a battle of ideas. The battle has been going on since the emergence of fascism and communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's

a battle between totalitarianism and classical liberalism. Therefore, Islam is not really the source of the conflict. It is simply the arena in which the war is now being fought. Let me explain.

The Enlightenment in Western society challenged the cultural, political and intellectual dominance of Christianity. In so doing, knowledge and science were freed from the restraints of religious dogma. The idea of individual freedoms and rights emerged and open debate was encouraged. The United States of America eventually became a leader of this new type of society. It was a country founded on liberty and thus it was deemed a liberal society in the philosophical sense of that word. It was founded on the ideas of ever increasing freedom, rationality and wealth. For the first 100 years there was a feeling of unimaginable progress in the west, cheered on by the slogan, "Upward and onward forever." But after the immense destruction of WWI the dominance of liberal ideas lost their gleam.

The nations that considered themselves the most advanced and civilized in the world, slaughtered one another's citizens until over nine million people were dead and twenty-one million wounded. With this carnage, the belief in humanities advancement through reason and freedom came into question. Serious challenges to political and social liberalism formed. During the next eighty years, the world saw the emergence of one totalitarian regime after the other. The communists of Russia and China, the Fascists of Italy and Spain and the Nazi's of Germany all came to challenge the Enlightenment values of liberal society. Each one came with its own ideological underpinnings and charismatic leaders. Each one left in its wake millions of innocent dead. The radical Islamists today are the latest form of totalitarian threat.

Let's look at what these totalitarian movements have in common. First of all, they look at liberal society not as a purveyor of freedom and justice for all, but rather as a force of exploitation and greed. Furthermore they teach that liberal civilization needs to be destroyed. Keep in mind that Lenin and Stalin ordered mass killings in the name of their communist revolution. Mussolini fascists ruled with an iron fist. Spain had Franco's form of fascism and Hitler's Nazis took human extermination and race politics to the extreme. Each one enforced

submission to its authoritarian ideology. Each ideology demanded unquestioned belief and support. Each one had a plan to unify humanity under a single and total doctrine. In the name of human betterment, these ideologies insisted on mass obedience and engaged in mass killing. Common morality was set aside in pursuit of their ideals. They had apocalyptic visions of themselves being the ones' responsible for eradicating evil and purifying society. The Marxists in Russia and China were cleansing society of the bourgeois capitalists. The Nazis claimed to be purifying the human race. In all cases, death was a tool to achieve their objectives and therefore was not seen as immoral. In all cases, these insane murderers and their apocalyptic fantasies were supported and even cheered on by the multitudes as they slaughtered fellow human beings, including many of their own citizens. The Islamist terrorists today kill with the same sense of righteous justification. Death is a tool, and they believe their cause is above common moral restrictions. They too are encouraged by crowds in the streets, in the mosques and by religious and political leaders who share their apocalyptic vision and their desire to cleanse the world of Zionist-crusaders and their allies. They too view liberal civilization as one of exploitation, immorality and greed. Liberal ideas of doubt and skepticism, free-inquiry and tolerance are seen as impediments to knowing and obeying the one true God.

In Islam, submission to God and God's laws is the ultimate goal. The radical Islamists see themselves as the enforcers of these laws. And they believe that it's only through their interpretation of Islamic laws that unity and just society can be created. Just like the totalitarian regimes of the past, they have a unifying ideology that is beyond human questioning and is said to lead towards the betterment of all humanity. Again we find leaders who murder children and others in the name of their ideology and we find masses of people willing to accept their pathological ideas. One of the most frightening aspects of this current form of totalitarianism is that it has wrapped itself in the flag of Islam which is practiced by over one billion of the world's population. If Islamic moderates continue to appease and quietly support terrorism in the name of their religion, it could have even more devastating affects on the world.

It is a war of ideas as much as anything and it is critical that we win. Guns and bombs alone will not win the war on terror. The terrorists are basing their fight on scholarly doctrines, very well thought out and argued. They have well educated religious leaders, and articulate modern authors. They have thousands of mosques and Islamic schools which are used to educate adults and an entire generation of children. They are well funded and apparently well organized. After WWI, the communists and Fascists rose to power based on argument and ideas. Their critique of liberalism was shrewd and had some validity. Western societies were exploiting other nations and peoples. There was injustice and abuse and immorality being perpetuated. These gave the totalitarians arguments a sense of legitimacy. The Islamists today point to western exploitation and western support of corrupt dictators and kings who are oppressing their people and this gives their argument the ring of truth. The problem, of course, is that they embed these critiques into a pathological ideology that justifies hatred and murder and requires strict, unquestioning acceptance and obedience to authoritarian principles.

One of the problems that have allowed one totalitarian regime after the other to gain prominence has been that people in liberal societies have accepted them and made apologies for them. The Nazis were helped by the anti-war French Socialists and other groups in Europe and America that defended them and their cause. Stalin was able to torment half of Europe in part due to naïve trade union workers and others who accepted that his brand of communism was a step forward.

Berman argues that totalitarian regimes arose due to the failures of liberal civilization, and then they were allowed to flourish due to the failure to effectively understand and counter these regimes and ideologies. Today we find certain people defending suicide bombers claiming that this is a rational response to their situation. But suicide bombing is neither rational nor worthy of defending. They are part of what Berman calls “a pathological mass movement.” It’s important that we recognize them as such and speak out against them.

This leads me to my point for Unitarians to ponder. Every once in a while I hear someone say, "Unitarians can believe anything they want to." No we can't! If we claim that everything is permitted, then we're saying in essence that moral values do not exist. Or those moral values are relative and determined only by individuals. Both statements are troublesome and do not reflect Unitarian religion. We are in fact a living legacy of the Enlightenment tradition. It's built on freedom, tolerance and reason. So we reject the notion that there is one single source of authority to which we must all submit. And yet, in our rebellion against authoritarian religion we did not reject morality and meaning. We cannot believe anything we want. Instead, we are guided by conscience, by reason, by our relationships in community and by love. This is very different from believing anything you want. We certainly believe in healthy skepticism, doubt and debate and feel these can lead us towards truth and meaning. Our tradition affirms pluralistic societies that uphold the right to believe or not believe as one chooses. Therefore, our tradition stands in opposition to totalitarianism of any kind. And, in fact, the religion of Islam is compatible with the values of tolerance, human rights and responsible freedom.

These ideas only threaten Muslim totalitarians who seek an absolutist vision of existence. If we're going to win the war on terror, we'll need to win the war of ideas. It will require self-examination of our liberal societies to respond to the valid aspects of their critique. But it will also require our ability to name the pathological and murderous aspects of their movement and stop them anyway we can. Berman makes the case for a "Third Force" which is neither pacifist nor politically realist. It requires our commitment to human rights and freedoms, especially woman's rights. We need to advocate "...ethnic and religious tolerance. We need to develop a politics against racism and anti-Semitism, no matter how inconvenient that might seem to the Egyptian media and the House of Saud; a politics against the ultra-right in Israel too, no matter how much that might enrage the Likud and its supporters; a politics of secular education, of pluralism, and law... a politics to fight against poverty and oppression; a politics

of authentic solidarity across the Muslim world...". When he talks of a politics of authentic solidarity across the Muslim world he's contrasting that with current attempts at solidarity through violence and hatred. There are some signs of hope.

According to the United Nations, last year three million children in Afghanistan enrolled in school and many of them were girls. The Afghans just had their first democratic elections and they appeared successful. It will take resolve to win the war on terror, but preserving liberal society is worth it. Keep in mind that liberal society is a relatively new phenomenon in human history. It has barely existed for two centuries and much of that time it has been under attack by totalitarian forces.

May you and I not confuse this latest totalitarian movement with the religion of Islam. It's bad enough that the terrorists misconstrue their own religion, let us not do it too.

May we all heed these words from the Quran:

You Humankind:

We have created you as a single family,

And made you into nations and tribes

That you might come to know and cherish one another. (49:13)

Amen.