

*Hope Behind the Headlines:
An Optimist Reflects on the Future of Islam
and Fundamentalist Religion.*

Walter G. Andrews

Reading (James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.)

Religious faith traditions cannot be judged solely by utilitarian criteria. Traditions of religious faith, if life-giving and life-transforming, do much more than call us to live in covenant fidelity with our companions in being. Religious faith must enable us to face tragedy and finitude—in the devastating and bewildering particular forms they come to us—without giving into despair or morbidity. Religious faith must name and face that deep-going tendency in us to make ourselves and the extensions of ourselves central in the world.

Sermon:

I don't know about you but I'm getting pretty sick of hearing about, thinking about, and talking about the way our country and its relations with the rest of the world have gone since the turning point of 9/11. I have gotten no pleasure from seeing my earliest—and gloomiest—predictions about the situation in Iraq come true one after another. I get nothing but misery out of following the trajectory I extrapolate from the follies I see committed in the Middle East every day—by my country and by others. And when I talk to my friends and colleagues and students and other UU's, their experiences seem to be much like mine. I can't believe that many or any of you are feeling especially optimistic about things changing for the better any time soon. We are assaulted at every turn by talk of "wars" and conflicts: war on terror, war by terror, clash of civilizations, culture wars, war on Christmas, warring fundamentalisms. And each of these seems to involve a problem too large, intractable, and amorphous to allow us much hope of effecting positive change. Many of us see ourselves—our country—being dragged down into the muck. We are terrorized by enemies without and ruthless opportunists within. We feel trapped between bands of rabid fundamentalists each bent on realizing its own Armageddon and we watch ourselves give up hard-won freedoms and cherished ideals in a frenzy of fear. It is difficult to avoid being overwhelmed by despair when one looks at our deteriorating relations with much of the world and with the Muslim world in particular.

What I want to do today is to step away from "viewing with alarm" and focusing on what has gone wrong. I want, in fact, to step back, to suggest a broader and longer view of one significant aspect of the situation in the Middle East, a view that, I believe,

can put our present turmoil in a more realistic and, perhaps even, more hopeful perspective. So, let's begin with a greatly abbreviated glimpse at few broad historical trends and cultural tendencies that have never gotten much press.

By the 19th century (the 1800s), the Ottoman Empire was failing...but it was still huge and had a significant impact on many people: on Muslims and non-Muslims from North Africa to the Balkans and the steppes of Central Asia and especially on people living in the area of the Central Middle East that we are so concerned about today. Educated Middle Easterners read Ottoman newspapers; the progressive intellectual cream of the crop from all over the Middle East carried out their higher education in Istanbul, the Ottoman capital. We must remember too that the term "Ottoman" did not just mean Turks but encompassed many ethnic groups and languages from Arabic and Ottoman Turkish to Greek and Serbo-Croatian.

The Empire may have been failing but it was also being shaken up by change and intellectual ferment. Young people were being trained in European languages—something new for the Ottomans. They were sent to Europe for training and exiled to Europe for punishment when they got too uppity. Foremost in their minds and in the minds of those who sent them was the simple and pragmatic question: "Why has Europe passed us by economically as well as in military technology and inventiveness and what can we do to catch up?"

Ottoman visitors to Europe were quite impressed by many features European life and institutions: for example, *the flourishing of science*, which drove both economic growth and military success; *representative government*, which seemed to hold out the promise of broad participation, intellectual openness and wide-ranging, creative debate; *a modern educational system* in which ideas could be freely explored in an atmosphere relatively unrestrained by religious dogma. The story of nineteenth century Middle Eastern intellectuals enamored of progressive Western notions is rather well known.

What isn't as well known is that Muslim Ottoman progressives did not like everything they saw in the West. In fact, some aspects of life in the West horrified and disgusted them. In the great cities of the West, grinding, hopeless poverty lived quite visibly side-by-side with vast wealth, opulence, and morally questionable public behaviors that ignored the good of society as a whole. Appalling numbers of impoverished women and children, female and male—some of them very young—were eking out short and degraded lives as prostitutes; public drunkenness, disease, and starvation were prominent features of most major cities.

Islam is, at its heart, a religion with a strong focus on the well-being of the community. We, in the West, tend to see that focus manifested in restrictions on public behavior that we find strange or excessively controlling: for example, the veiling and covering of women, public separation of the sexes... Less visible and less often remarked are the many manifestations of concern for the welfare of society as a whole. It is one of the pillars of the faith that all Muslims tax themselves to support community

welfare. The great Mosques of Islam were not only houses of worship but complexes of institutions supported by the community for the communal good: soup kitchens that provided nourishing meals to anyone, hospitals and mental institutions that treated everyone at no charge, free primary schools, higher education institutions, and public libraries. Wealthy men and women poured huge amounts of money into endowments paying for social services and into the support and building of public service institutions from mosques to fountains for supplying fresh water to the populace. Muslims were often appalled by the 19th century West for very good reasons.

So...in the 19th century Ottomans were eagerly debating their encounter with the West—sorting through the good and bad, the things that were compatible with a Muslim sense of values and those that were not. These were the first steps in the evolution of an authentic Muslim faith and practice that would encompass the modern world. Let me give just one example (out of many) of how this adjustment worked in practice. There is a *sura* in the Quran that praises those who “conduct their affairs by mutual consultation... (xlii-38)”. And the Prophet said, on the subject of leading the Muslim community, “Consult with them on the matter.” These citations were taken by Ottoman reformers as an implicit religious sanction for experiments in representative, parliamentary government.

At this point, Islam was on the threshold of a period of development similar in form—though not in actual content—to the development of religious views in Europe since the Protestant Reformation: for example, the accommodation of Calvinism to middle-class bourgeois capitalism or the growth of “liberal” religious perspectives and secular systems of value that were in harmony with enlightenment beliefs in science and reason. However...what would have come out of the gradual evolution of Islam, we don’t really know—we don’t know because that evolution was abruptly nipped in the bud.

The story of that bud-nipping is a long one—and one that has not really come to an end yet. To reduce a very complex history to a few inadequate sentences, we might say the following:

- In early modern and modern times, the Middle East was profoundly affected by a history of western colonial expansion that had begun as early as the 15th century and reached a sort of climax in World War I and its aftermath.
- When the Ottoman Empire supported the losing side in World War I, the floodgates were opened for European powers to dismember Ottoman territories in the Middle East and to divide up hegemony over the pieces.
- For Middle Easterners, “liberation” from Ottoman rule (even in the new Republic of Turkey) was obtained at the price of buying into a western project that, at its best, proposed spreading the ideals of secular, representative government, freedom of speech, and access to modern scientific thought. At its worst, the

project was intended to open a relatively supine Muslim East to exploitation by Western capital. (And this was before oil was a major concern.)

- As a result, influential intellectual, economic, and political elites all over the area began to place their faith in some combination of nationalism, secularism, socialism, and education—a faith that lay at the heart of progressive, westernizing movements from the Turkish Republic to the *Ba_ath* or “Renaissance” party in Syria and Iraq. At the most powerful levels, religion was marginalized and widely portrayed as the enemy of progress and an obstacle to the coming renaissance of Middle Eastern glory.

Now, I want to interrupt the history lecture and digress briefly to mention some theory in the area of developmental psychology, especially moral and faith development. I’m sure some of you have heard a lot or a little about this work. For those of you who have not heard, let me point out—again all too briefly—that in the late sixties and seventies, Lawrence Kohlberg used Piaget’s theory of child development stages and Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development together with data-based empirical studies to create a theory of the stages of moral development. Following Kohlberg, his younger colleague, Jim Fowler, introduced a theory of faith development in stages that correspond in many respects to Erikson’s and Kohlberg’s stages. Today, I am going to reduce this very pertinent and fascinating theory to a few major points:

1. “Faith”, in Fowler’s sense, does not necessarily mean “religion”. It references an individual and communal commitment to a shared center of value and power. The term could be equally applied to, say, humanist faith in the primacy of reason and the human mind, or libertarian faith in the workings of the marketplace, or a communist’s faith in the sayings of Lenin or Chairman Mao. It is anything that helps us make sense of our lives and the world around us.
2. Unlike the stages of child development—all of which must be worked through in order to become a fully-functioning adult—very few people move through all the stages of faith development and some even settle in adult versions of early-childhood stages. For example, at what Fowler calls the “*mythic-literal*” stage, a child might believe unshakably in the actuality of a bearded super-human man living in the sky from where he magically controls our lives in various ways. Adults who believe implicitly in the literal truth of the Bible or in the actual existence of angels and saints are adult mythic-literalists. As adolescents we start thinking about other people and especially about them thinking about us. At the *Synthetic-Conventional* Stage, this kind of thinking inclines us toward a faith that nurtures our interpersonal relationships and conforms to the faith of those around us. As young adults we begin rejecting conformity, asserting our individuality, and questioning the myths and truths of our youth. This is the *Individuative-Reflective* Stage. Those who go on to the *Conjunctive* Stage are able to integrate

- the old myths and the myths of other cultures into a new understanding of their truth. The final stage—*Universalizing Faith*—is the realm of holy persons and saints and I will say nothing about it today.
3. Faith communities have an important nurturing role in faith development. However, faith communities also have an average level of faith development that adults in the community are expected to attain. Faith communities are generally very good at bringing people up to this average level (called *the modal development level*) but there is a strong tendency for this level to set an upper limit for faith development—a level beyond which further development is discouraged. (UUs are generally—but not always—pretty good about not setting upper limits for faith development.)
 4. Lastly—and this is a crucial point—it does not seem possible to shortcut the faith development process. That is you cannot, for example, train a child to skip the mythic-literal stage and create a young individuated-reflective thinker. What is more, the tendency of many or most radical “conversion” experiences is for the convert to begin over at a mythic-literalist stage—which results in a phenomenon we see all the time—the convert who seems more literalist, fervent, and devout than those who have been in the believing community since birth.

So—to tie things together—what do I think faith development theory has to do with the situation in the Middle East today? In my view—looking through the lens of faith development theory—what has happened in the modern Middle East is this:

- As I mentioned before, 20th century colonial intervention in the region aborted development in the Muslim faith community by coercing influential segments of the community to convert to a secular, nationalist (and often socialist) faith.
- That coerced conversion had two immediate consequences: first, it created a cadre of mythic-literal secular nationalists; and second, it pitted the mythic-literal secular nationalists against a pre-existing core of faith communities comfortably living at mythic-literalist or synthetic-conventional stages of average development.
- At the next level of consequences, secular nationalist leaders felt themselves obliged to force other faith communities to submit to their vision by increasingly violent, brutal, and dictatorial methods—more or less what we saw very starkly realized in the regimes of Saddam Huseyn in Iraq, Hafizu'l-asad in Syria, Shah Reza Pahlavi in Iran.
- To complicate matters, faith in secularism and progress failed Middle Eastern leaders and their communities in two important ways: first of all, this faith did not result in military or global political power or inclusion in the first-world economy as had been hoped. The central Middle East

remained little more than a site for the exploitation of resources by the West and it was dominated militarily by the tiny state of Israel with the support of its Western allies. Second, capitalist or socialist secularism did not satisfy fundamental needs for a coherent and cohesive ethical system congruent with deeply held communal values; nor did scientific thought provide clear and comprehensible answers to fundamental questions about the meaning of life.

In faith development terms, what happened relatively recently in the Middle East was the conversion of powerful members of society and young people strongly influenced by them to a version of traditional Islam understood and expressed at a mythic-literalist level. At this level, for example, it makes perfect sense to sacrifice one's life in defense of one's religion because there will be actual, physical rewards for your sacrifice in an actual material paradise. As a point of comparison, I would suggest that, in the United States, the stunning—and to some disturbing—success of mythic-literalist (or fundamentalist) churches and their engagement—sometimes violently—in activist anti-progressive movements is not a result of ignorance or stupidity. It is a case of reasonably intelligent, educated people losing their faith in secularism and restarting their faith development at a mythic-literal level of commitment to a faith that they had long since abandoned or had never experienced.

So—given all of this—what do I see as hope for the future? Let me list just a few things that could well happen—things for you to think about and things that might suggest policies we could urge on our own leaders.

- The disaster in Iraq could make the West, and the U. S. in particular, wary of violent intrusions and so-called “nation building” in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. Let me say, I am not talking here about “isolationism” because, in fact, the term “isolationism” has no relevance in a world that is thoroughly and unalterably globalized by economic ties and the proliferation of information technologies.
- As a result, the revival of faith in Islam as a religion and social practice might be allowed to develop naturally and even be nurtured in its faith development. Contrary to the images we receive from the Middle East every day, the area is full of extremely intelligent, thoughtful, and well-meaning people. As it was starting to do in the 19th century, Islam will, I believe, develop its own forms of accommodating to the world of the 21st century and recover a sense of controlling its own destiny. Developed Islamic notions of “freedom” and “democracy” and “markets” will likely be different in major and minor ways from ours (and from each others'). [For example, it is impossible for me to imagine a version of Islamic society that is not far more “socialist” than ours—which means that our

mythic-literalist “free-market” ideologues will need to grow out of their primitive aversion to any and all “socialist or communalist” ideas.]

- I am expecting (somewhat hopefully) that *the modal development level* of faith (the average level) will rise in this country also. And by this I mean the level of faith development among secularists, atheists, and humanists as well as among religionists of various kinds. I am confident that this will allow us to interact more positively and effectively with our neighbors in an increasingly interconnected world. Historically—so far as I can see—the failure of force as a means for establishing peace and security has always been the prelude to positive, progressive change. This means that we can stop despairing. We can begin to look on the disasters of today as an invitation to cross the threshold leading to a new world in which enough of us move beyond the arrogance of our own righteousness and learn to read the stories that define and motivate our faiths in ways that link up positively to the stories of others.

I want to end by saying a few things about Unitarian Universalists. My impression is that our modal development level as a group is high in comparison to other religions: perhaps as high as level 4 (*individuated-reflective*) and often above. We are certainly a refuge for those who bang up against the faith development ceilings set by other faiths. But still, we must struggle against our own subconscious desires to set our own ceiling and, even more so, we must struggle against our impatience with those at earlier stages of development—and this includes not only those of other faiths but our own mythic-literalist children and synthetic conventional adolescents. What we need to remember is that there are many ways to develop in faith—many contexts and many stories—but develop we must and from the beginning. In this sense, we might say that Unitarian Universalism is not the *answer* for everyone but, in its most mature form, it represents a *goal*—the goal of on-going development in faith and morality that—at the highest level—unites and universalizes the spiritual aspirations of all humankind.

Benediction:

Let us leave this place with a renewed faith in the potential for growth that exists in all people. Let us go, believing in the possibility of peace for all peoples; believing in our ability to confront violence with courage; believing in the pursuit of peace by peaceful means and in the power of love to transform the world. Amen, ameen, shalom, selam...