

Sacred Conversations: Race and Religion

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Two lifetimes ago, I taught the languages and religions of pre-Islamic Iran in the Middle East Languages and Cultures Department of Columbia University. During that time, I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to live with and study the Parsi community in India for six months. The Parsis are contemporary adherents of the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism. Once the official religion of the Persian Empire and for a time Armenia, Zoroastrianism is now the creed of roughly 100,000 Parsis in India, most of them resident in and around Mumbai, perhaps another 10,000 or so in Iran itself, and maybe another 10,000-20,000 in scattered communities throughout the world, including the United States and Canada. Zubin Mehta, formerly the conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and now conductor of the Israel Philharmonic, is a Parsi.

The ancestors of the Parsis of India were a group of Zoroastrians who fled Iran in the wake of the Arab conquest. They resettled in the territory of Gujarat in western India sometime during the tenth century. Legend has it that they arrived off the Indian coast by boat, and that they sat offshore in their boats while their leaders negotiated their possible resettlement in India with a local *rajah*. Since the Parsis and the Gujaratis didn't know each other's languages, they had to communicate non-verbally. The *rajah* presented the Parsi leader with a cup of milk filled to the brim, indicating that there wasn't enough room in the land for these strangers. The Parsi leader, in turn, added a few crystals of sugar to the milk. The cup didn't overflow, and the mixture was sweetened. The logic was compelling, and the Parsis were allowed to settle. It's a nice immigration story to keep in mind during a time of anti-immigration sentiment in our own country.

But immigration isn't today's topic here. We're here to talk about race and religion. And to move to that topic, we need to hear a bit of the rest of the story. The Gujarati king's generosity was not unconditional. The immigrant Iranian Zoroastrians were permitted to settle in Gujarat, but only on the condition that they keep their religious faith to themselves, and that they would never try to proselytize the local population. This arrangement was similar to that applied to Christians and Jews who lived under the rule of Muslims, and, for that matter, to those Zoroastrians who remained in Iran and were considered to be "people of the Book" by their Muslim rulers. The message was, "You will be tolerated here, but you won't be equal. You can keep your religion, but don't try to spread it."

Over the years, that original negotiated agreement became incorporated into Zoroastrian belief as revealed truth. It was internalized to the point that by the time I visited Mumbai in 1979, the big debate in the Parsi community was whether someone not born to Parsi parents could become a Zoroastrian. Accepting this limitation even after secularism

became the official policy of the new Indian state amounted to a kind of suicide pact for the Parsis: there were no convert to reinvigorate and expand the faith; even the offspring of mixed marriages were excluded from the community. The Parsis imposed racial and nationality boundaries upon their own faith tradition, thereby restricting a faith tradition that from its outset made universal claims and had a universal scope. The concepts of paradise and hell were Zoroastrian ideas that made their way into Judaism during the Babylonian exile, and thence into Christianity and Islam.

As I studied the phenomenon of restricting religion by race and its impact on the Parsi community, it occurred to me that this confluence of race and religion, where to be a Zoroastrian required that one had to be born to Zoroastrian parents--two of them--amounted to a kind of violence against the faith itself. Let me illustrate what I mean. I remember a conversation with my Parsi friend, Mr. Marfatia, who was a cook in the predominantly Parsi social club where I took up residence during my stay in India. Mr. Marfatia liked me, and I liked him. He took me under his wing, and introduced me around in the community. Many Parsis, including Mr. Marfatia, had incorporated the Hindu belief in reincarnation into their Zoroastrianism. It helped to explain, and to humanize, human diversity, I guess, and it softened the restrictions I've already noted. You may not be a Zoroastrian now, but perhaps you were one before, or will become one in the future. At one point during our conversation, Mr. Marfatia looked at me intently and said, "You know, you look like a Parsi. I think that in a former incarnation you *were* a Parsi." He meant this as a compliment, I know. But I replied, "Well, now I'm a Christian. Did I go up or down?"

I didn't need to see his pained expression to realize that I had made a hurtful remark, and I immediately apologized. But, cruel as it was, my question touched on the central issue of religion and race, which is that religion and race are a deadly combination, deadly for the faith and possibly deadly for others as well. At the Parsi end of the power spectrum, putting religion and race together can lead to self-destruction; at the other end of the power spectrum, the Nazi end, for example, it can lead to genocide.

I am not an anthropologist, but even in my relatively shallow reading about race, it has struck me that almost everyone who has written knowledgeably about race agrees that the concept of race has no scientific basis. Race is either a social construct or a cognitive quirk. It is either something that has been thought up to bolster the subjugation or subordination of one group of people by another, or there is something within us, like original sin, that causes us to draw distinctions between people, distinctions that inevitably disadvantage some people and grant privileges to others. Or perhaps the ideology of race comes from a combination of factors.

Theories about race came to the fore in the early nineteenth century during the heyday of colonialism. Just as Linnaeus developed a typology for the plant and animal worlds, so the theorists of racialism espoused a typology of human beings by dividing those human beings into imagined "races." Human beings could be "sorted out" and placed in an ascending order of "development" on the basis of this criterion of race. This was an "enlightenment" view that served the interests of colonialists who could claim the moral

high ground in their bearing of the white man's burden, and buttressed as well the arguments of slaveholders, who now had what they considered scientific support for the dehumanization and exploitation of members of what they considered to be an inferior category of human beings. While slavery had existed in the ancient and medieval world, there it was in a way more honest: it was based not on some presumed "scientific" criterion of race, but rather on the brute reality of political and military power.

But what may not be so evident is that the idea of "religion," or more precisely, "the religions," emerged during the same period of history, and from the same colonial mindset that produced the concept of race. The word *religio* doesn't appear in the Bible, not even in the Vulgate translation. Before the colonial period, the word religion had to do not so much with a particular set of beliefs or with a particular group of believers but rather with the quality of the human being's relationship with God. One of our forebears in the Reformed Tradition, Ulrich Zwingli, wrote a *Commentary on True and False Religion* in the sixteenth century, but the purpose of the book wasn't to argue that Christianity was the true religion as opposed to others; rather Zwingli was defining true religion as trust in a merciful God, and false religion as false piety or superstition. Taken to its logical conclusion, Zwingli's argument considered false religion to be the tendency of human beings to give their allegiance to a belief system constructed by human beings rather than to God.¹ It was a form of idolatry.

But by the eighteenth century, religion had come to be defined as a set of beliefs, rather than as a description of how one conceives and acts upon one's relationship with God. Religion was no longer roughly synonymous with piety; it was a term used to discriminate between presumed sets of beliefs. And it was the European colonialists, who were both the heirs to the Enlightenment methodology of de-personalization and intellectualization, and who wielded the dominant political, economic and military power of the time, who then presumed to name and categorize the religions they identified. It was from this era that the whole concept of "comparative" religion, which not only described but ranked these religions also emerged.

The whole idea of "the religions" was a concept developed in the West during the period of European colonialism. Before the nineteenth century there was no indigenous concept of or term for Buddhism, or Hinduism, or Taoism, or Confucianism. These constructs were developed by British colonialists as a way to organize the world religiously in the same way they organized it colonially. The same impulse that led to the drawing of national boundaries that were in most cases not natural boundaries led to the imposition of religious boundaries. And just as those imposed national boundaries, notably in the Middle East and in Africa, have caused endless warfare and endless suffering, the religious boundaries have caused endless tensions, misunderstandings and conflict. Boundaries originally implemented to further a policy of analysis, division and conquest have in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continued to divide and divide and divide.

Both sets of boundaries are, in that sense, artificial. Our era, perhaps beginning with the Iranian Revolution, but coinciding with similar developments in various religious

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 35

communities, has been called the era of the revival of religion. But this revival of religion has not led to a renewal of human piety and righteousness and justice. Rather, this revival has led to extremism and religious chauvinism. It is both a world-wide and national phenomenon.

In 1962 Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a scholar of the religious traditions and a Presbyterian minister, wrote *The Meaning and End of Religion*. It was an important book that deserves revisiting particularly during a time when religious divisions seem to be particularly intense. Smith made a fundamental distinction between religion and faith. Religion, he said, may be an expression of faith, but it does not comprehend faith. Religion is “the historical construct, in continuous and continuing construction, of those who participate in it.”² Religion and theology are a part of this world, while faith, which seeks the transcendent, lies beyond theology, in the human heart.³ While religion defines and narrows, faith is expansive; while religion has to do primarily with the head; faith is both head and heart; while religion feels most comfortable with the law, faith has to do with love.

This is a lot to deal with, and the best I can do to illustrate what I’m trying to get across is to do what I have always enjoyed doing in talking about the Middle East, which is to talk about actual experiences rather than abstract theories. In the late 1980’s, during one of my many visits to Turkey, I was accompanied by members of the UCBWM Board of Directors. At the conclusion of our visit, in Tarsus, we met with Turkish supporters of the American Board schools, Redhouse Press and the Gaziantep hospital, and then we had a closing worship service, with communion, for our delegation and our colleague missionaries and associates. As we prepared for worship, our Turkish friends, who were Muslims or secularists, departed; except one man, who remained to worship with us. When it came time for the distribution of the elements, I noted that this man received the bread and the cup. Afterward, one of the American visitors approached him and said, “I hadn’t realized that you are a Christian.” “Does the label mean so much to you?” was our Turkish friend’s response.

It turned out that this man had been part of a group of Turks in Gaziantep who called themselves “Jesusists.” They considered themselves to be Muslim followers of Jesus. They had rejected the term “Christian” because that term had unpleasant historical associations in Turkey, associations with the Crusades, and with European colonialism. But there was something in the interaction between Turkish Muslims and American Christian missionaries that had led to an expansion of faith for both; this faith was not a defining factor but rather was a broadening and expansive factor. It was a faith that had opened people to a deeper spiritual consciousness. This opening would not have been possible if they had confined themselves to the neat religious categories of the world’s expectations.

² *Ibid.*, p. 165

³ *Ibid.*, p. 185

Let me try another example. In the early 1980's I was part of an informal gathering of Christians and Jews who were trying to find common ground in our approach to the issue that continues to lie at the center of Middle East conflicts, the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The precipitating factor was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. One of the rabbis in our group had almost lost his job because of his vocal opposition to Israeli policy. A number of the Christians in our group, including yours truly, had been accused by other Christians as well as some Jews of being anti-Semitic because of our criticism of the invasion and of the United States' tacit support of that invasion. We Christians and Jews were, in a sense, seeking refuge in each other's company, in each other's anguish, in our common values. We were able to say to one another that at some deep level we had more in common with each other than we did with other members of our own faith community.

I have read that geneticists who have studied peoples' DNA have concluded that there is as much DNA variety within presumed racial groups as there is between racial groups. I wonder if the same is not true of our religious DNA. I know that I have found kindred spirits, or to put it another way, a common faith, in members of other religious traditions; and that I have found myself profoundly at odds with adherents of my own religious tradition. This is not to say that faiths are relative, that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something. It is to say that my own faith has expanded and been deepened by insights and relationships I've experienced in the encounter with people of other religious traditions. I have become, I think, a better Christian, a more faithful Christian, because I have met and communed with people from the Jewish and Islamic traditions.

There has been a great deal of talk about our time as marking the beginning of a post-racial era in American history. It is not for me to say whether this is the case. I happen to think that the jury is still out on that one. One of the most telling moments during the recent presidential campaign came when an angry constituent confronted Senator McCain with an assertion, an accusation against then Senator Obama. "He's, he's . . . an Arab," she said. "No ma'am," was Senator McCain's replay, "He's a fine family man."

This was a telling moment because it brought together race and religion as defining and divisive factors. Leave aside the fact that there are huge disagreements among people who call themselves Arabs as to what constitutes being an Arab. It was clear that to this woman, Arab and Muslim were synonymous, and both were negative designations. Senator McCain's response didn't help, because in a way it reinforced her and others' negative assumptions about both Arabs and Muslims. He seemed to concede the point that being an Arab, or a Muslim, is a bad thing. For the record, not all Arabs are Muslims—some 10 million Christians call themselves Arabs—and the large majority of Muslims are not Arabs, even though Islam emerged onto the historical scene in what was called Arabia.

But let's set aside the facts. Feelings are not facts, but they are feelings, and feelings are often more potent than facts. The prospect of a post-racial society is upsetting for many people because a post-racial society would involve a challenge to their preconceptions of how the world is supposed to be arranged. It would turn their world upside-down. Racism

has to do with more than feelings, but feelings are behind the way people give structure to the world, how they view the world. Erasing distinctions, for all the freedom that entails, also can mean the deconstruction of the world as we know it. A new heaven and a new earth just might be in the offing, and for some that may seem more a threat than an exciting possibility.

In the same way, a post-religious world, a world in which we seek the commonality of faith across the boundaries of religion is also an upsetting prospect for people who prefer the certainties of inherited truth and familiar categories. If God is still speaking, as we assert in the United Church of Christ, does it follow that God is speaking English only, or that God is speaking solely in Christian theological categories? Or is the still-speaking God calling us beyond those human-made definitions that are bounded by the fact that we human beings ourselves are bounded?

John Cobb has issued a challenge to the United Church of Christ to “save the world.” He may have invested too much hope in our flawed vessel. We’re a denomination that seems to be endlessly embroiled in and preoccupied with the controversy about how we’re going to organize ourselves. But maybe we’re better at the big things than we are at the little things. Maybe at our best our faith, and increasingly our reality, will equip us to provide leadership as we move into the post-racial and post-religious era that lies ahead of us.