

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 25, 2013
Reimagining Religion: Renewal or Resistance?

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION: OPPORTUNITY OR OBSTACLE?

“A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening.”
~ Søren Kierkegaard

A powerful photomontage made it's way through social media this week with a bold headline beneath it: Religion: Some People Are Still Doing it Right. The sub-text read: “During the current violent protests in Egypt, Christians are joining hands around Muslims so they can pray in peace, and Muslims are forming human barriers to protect Christian churches during worship services.”

I reflected on these photos in the context of the scriptural texts we heard this morning from the prophet Jeremiah that Richard read for us and the gospel of Luke. That is, that we are grasped essentially by a God passionate for the fate of human beings. God's passion for goodness and wholeness endeavors to become our passion as well, taking shape amid specific, sometimes harsh realities of the contexts in which we find ourselves. While we sit in this beautiful church this morning, we are safe and secure. There is no bloodshed and violence just outside these doors or the need for us to be protected by others – we can easily take that for granted. As a relatively healthy and able bodied woman who can go out for a run or exercise regularly with minimal discomfort or pain, I have very little in common with the poor woman in today's gospel who was bent over and could not stand up straight. I'm really not able to fully understand the condition of her life that Jesus refers to as her “bondage.” Yet, as the commentaries for these texts I consulted pointed out, Jesus insists on turning our attention from the physical manifestation of the

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woman's disease to the broader context of her suffering. We move from identifying with a biblical story in a narrow way and begin to see and appreciate other dynamics that we need to see and are implored to grasp. It is the scope of sympathy, of empathy and this passion for goodness and wholeness that helps us

see these texts more widely. The photomontage from scenes in Egypt reminded me how critical and how urgent it is to be more focused on the driving passion of God to be engaged with humanity – all of humanity, not just some of humanity. The prophet Jeremiah is portrayed in the Hebrew scriptures today as ambivalent, citing his youthfulness as a reason to count him out. After all, true prophets speak against the data, which can be isolating and countercultural. Who campaigns for a job where one is marginalized and even endangered? Needless to say, there is no room for ambivalence among those pictured in the photos amidst the horrific violence in Egypt. God's passion for wholeness and goodness takes shape in these tragic realities of our time as an example of a contemporary prophetic act that is not bound by belief or dogma or tradition but by the centrality of the collective, visceral passion for the fate of human beings. It behooves us to pay attention.

These images and illustrations bring us today to the second in a series of three sermons on *The Future of Religion* and reimagining that prospect. Speaking of data, there was plenty shared last Sunday to create some context for this series. If you missed it or are interested in revisiting the data, you can access last week's sermon through our website in two forms, text and audio via I-Tunes.

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I concluded last Sunday with some questions that serve as a portal, an opening for today in regard to reimagining religion: Will we reach back and blindly apply past models to a vastly different world? Will we see new and creative uses of ancient traditions that celebrate the ability to demonstrate, define and practice religion in new ways? Will we respect the nature of a globalized world and the increased demands of awareness to those who are different from us?

What we do know and can say up to this point is that the religious feature of human lives globally or here in the United States is not dying or going to die. The data does indeed support this to a great extent. In an essay entitled *The Power of Experiential*

Faith, Dr. Diana Butler Bass, a historian of Christianity and a regular public commentator on religion, politics and culture, suggests that religion's future depends on its ability to renew itself in ways that enriches human flourishing and our capacity to love our neighbors as ourselves. She writes: "Although certain aspects of religion lend themselves to sociological, cultural, philosophical and economic analyses, religion is ultimately about faith – the human response to the divine is one of the most mysterious of human activities. Religious history is composed of unexpected events, unanticipated motivations and unlikely characters. Indeed, professional futurologists do not forecast what is coming; they develop maps of potential futures that people might create. If we do not know the future, than who can tell us what is to come?"

Martin Marty, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago suggests that religions survive by adapting. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – the world religions – may cherish most of what they were

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centuries ago, he says, but the teachings, feel and forms differ. Marty illustrates that within religions change is drastic, beginning with their location and centers of prosperity. Islam, long most at home in the Arab world or Southeast Asia is spreading across Africa with strong beachheads in Western Europe and North America. He predicts the most dramatic changes in the century ahead will be in arenas of Christianity, long seen as having a monopoly in Europe and America. Christianity will go continue to go south, he contends. While there may be revivals in Western Europe, the foreseeable assured gains will be in sub Saharan Africa, revitalized Latin America, and in parts of Asia. Needless to say, there are plenty of external factors that will continue to play roles begun in centuries past. Hierarchies are in trouble; and today globalization is the signal that moves religions beyond their old boundaries. Martin Marty suggests, and I agree with him, that general vistas like these obscure many of the basics. Traditional forces, by adapting, will survive. He puts it in these terms: “They speak to the souls of people everywhere. They offer constantly changing forms of

community in a world of extreme individualism. Forecasting continuing conflict within and among religions, therefore is not the whole story.”

What I gain from so much of the lively analysis about the religious horizon is that while religious and political leaders conjecture about either the demise or the growth of religion, the current framework for thinking about “the future of religion around the world is deeply inadequate,” and as Diana Butler Bass sees it, “is still intertwined mostly with Christian theological concerns,” which suggests to me serious limitations because it is often not well articulated or too narrow. Some would argue, particularly millenials, those under the age of 30 that the crisis in religion at the current time is perhaps the failure to have honest discussion about the notion of faith itself or just what is meant by

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“religion.” They contend it is often assumed that we are only talking about Christianity, and albeit a more conservative perspective.

Which brings us back to where I started. That is that the reimagining of religion has to retrieve at its very core the understanding that essentially a God, a divine presence passionate for the fate of human beings grasps us. That while the global South and other places may hold potential clues about primitive purity, conservatism or liberalism or tensions between religious communities, the clues, as Diana Butler Bass and others have illuminated for me, point still to the power and possibility of an experiential faith or spiritual practice. For example, where spirit infused movements of personal transformation promise ways of reordering life and community that ultimately increase human flourishing. When faith, religion, spiritual practice is an experience, a way of life that challenges systems of oppression, corruption and established power relationships, people gain a sense of worth, dignity, health and control over their lives. Finding just where we access these moments and movements may be less clear, but perhaps more imaginative these days.

I cannot get those images from the photomontage out of my head. And I do deeply respect and internalize the broader contexts of our religious texts as giving meaning to our 21st century lives. This is still possible in my mind. Obviously, I am a committed religious adherent called by vocation and tradition as I stand before you today as an Episcopal priest. I am certainly not willing to throw the baby out with the bath water as the saying goes. Though I do have many questions and healthy skepticism, I’m convinced religion can be and still is a force for

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good in the world, and I'm not willing to have my voice or experience silenced as a religious leader who desires to work toward reform, renewal and relevance, and more importantly, as one who embraces change, sees new paradigms and experiential shifts as healthy and appropriate. And I am convinced that organized religion has a future – understood as organized systems of belief and institutional structures – as long as it remains nimble, self critiquing and willing to reorganize itself, as Butler Bass puts it, “around meaningful spiritual experiences that enable people to embody the wisdom of their traditions and empower courageous action on behalf of others, for peace and for the planet.” That future does depend on us, those of who share some semblance of religious tradition or spiritual community and even those that don't - that somehow grounds and sustains us despite the disorientation, skepticism or confusion that is manifest in the empirical data of research. We cannot do this alone and cannot do so without listening to those whose voices may be missing from the conversation or easily dismissed for reasons of age, education, experience, economy, ethnicity, gender, geography, religious or spiritual tradition ...the list goes on.

Last week a recent June graduate came by my office to say goodbye. She has intersected with the office for religious life and Memorial Church throughout her career as a Stanford student and will be dearly missed. We've had many discussions, communally and personally about the nature and future of religion, how we create community in a more fractured society and among a generation like hers that is so

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technologically connected and savvy. A generation that is changing the very nature of what it means to be spiritual and religious in a globalized world. Even what we mean by religion itself. In a beautifully thoughtful thank you note she noted that a mentor's voice such as mine with religious and spiritual perspectives in challenging moments toward an uncertain future was one that rose above the others. This is quite humbling I must say, but also makes me even more convinced that hers is a generation that will not relinquish the foundation of spiritual underpinnings that bring broader meaning and empathy to life, that illuminate the choices they can and will make in their futures. They may look vastly different or be engaged much differently than previous generations, but they will be sought out. She is headed home for a month before she begins a stint with the Peace Corps in the Ukraine in September. These are indeed bittersweet moments in this work I am so privileged to be a part of on campus. But it is young women and men like her that gives me such hope, such outlook for not only the future and practice of religion, but for the flourishing of humanity as a whole. I have no doubt that in those images from Egypt, many of who were young people; she would be there among them, protecting others in the face of great danger, Christian, Muslim, or otherwise. As she left, I wondered too that somewhere down the road she might be a future historian who will have to tell us how we did in these shifting, changing and profound moments of religious history. Only time will tell.