

Quarterly Yoke Letter

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Renewing The Spirit...Renewing The Mind...

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Dear Friends,

We are living in a dangerous time. This is not startling news to the readers of this *Letter*. Many issues and various culture clashes threaten to undo the fabric of tolerant diversity that holds our world together. Such issues and clashes are no more prevalent than within our various religious communities and cultures. A number of years ago the former President of Earlham College and Middle-East expert, Dr. Landrum Bolling, was asked what concerned him most about our world. His response: "The rise of fundamentalism within all of the major faith traditions." As witnesses to what is happening in the Middle-East today, as well as to what we are experiencing in post 9/11 America, Dr. Bolling's words can now be understood as prophetic.

Fundamentalists and extremists will always be a part of all religious faith traditions, whether it is the fundamentalism that keeps a strangle hold on traditions that can no longer be defended reasonably, or an extremism that does not respect anyone else's tradition or position. There will always be those who will be intolerant. The *best* of our religious traditions, however, and the *best* that is within each of us, will seek to discover those areas within all of our faith expressions that unite and sustain us, and provide a basis of understanding and tolerance toward those who are *different*.

A few weeks ago, the former nun and now prolific writer, Karen Armstrong, spoke at Wayzata Community Church in Minnesota. She was introducing her new book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*. Of the many important things she said, none was more important than this: "Compassion is the wellspring of religion..." She made the important observation that *The Golden Rule* was first expressed by Confucius some 500 years before Jesus, and is the touchstone of all of the major faith traditions. As I reflected on Armstrong's statement, I began to consider the following questions: "What else unites and sustains us within our faith traditions?" "What are those elements, values, teachings and truths that we can respect and honor in our own Christian faith, as well as within the traditions of Judaism and Islam, that may help to lessen the danger of our time?" In short, "Without diluting our own witness and understanding of faith, but recognizing that ours is, indeed, a diverse world, *on what can we agree?*"

First, and at the heart of all three faith traditions, there is *a hunger for a divine/human connection*. Within Christianity, Judaism and Islam there are mystical traditions that greatly enhance our different faiths and our love of and search for God. The writings of such mystics as St. Francis within the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, and Thomas Kelly within the Quaker Christian tradition, exemplify this mystical element. It is his famous prayer that most know of St. Francis, but the book attributed to him titled, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* has become a classic to all those seeking a spiritual resource from the Roman Catholic mystical tradition. Thomas Kelly's book, *A Testament of Devotion* tells about Kelly's own spiritual transformation, and shows readers through the lens of his own experience what it means to be in an immediate relationship with the Living God. It was this immediacy of relationship that Kelly discovered following a very painful time in his own life. "To you in this room who are seekers," Kelly said to a group of Quakers at Germantown Friends Meeting in Philadelphia, "to you, young and old who have toiled all night and caught nothing, but who want to launch out into the deeps and let down your nets for a draught, I want to speak as simply, as tenderly, as clearly as I can. *For God can be found...*" Abraham Heschel within the Jewish tradition defines "spiritual" as "the ecstatic force that stirs all our goals. When we perceive it, it is as if our mind were gliding for a while with an eternal current" He writes about a religious person being, "one who holds God and humans in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair." Finally, the poet Rumi within the Sufi Muslim tradition (a mystical

form of the Muslim faith that seeks a direct experience of God) writes, “Look at spirit how it fuses with earth giving it new life...the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the deer far away yet together...Look at the unity of this spring and winter manifested in the equinox...” All of these writers from their various traditions are evidence of a hunger for and experience of a divine/human connection that can serve to unite and sustain us.

Second, a concern for *justice* is at the core of all of our faith traditions. “...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” writes the Prophet Amos in the Old or Hebrew Testament. (Amos 5:24) Jim Wallis of *Sojourners Magazine* has noted that archaeologists, in the peeling away of layers in their digs, are able to discern those periods when the Prophets of Israel were most vocal and active by recognizing when there is great discrepancy between the very rich and the very poor. Jesus made issues of justice the heart of his teaching, proclaiming that our neglect of those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison, is a rejection of him: “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matt. 25:45) Muhammad’s message was first greeted with hostility by those in charge when he preached an uncompromising monotheism, an end to licentiousness and a challenge to an unjust social order. Indeed, one of the five pillars of Islam addresses the disparity of wealth in the world, and admonishes those who have much to help lift the burden of those who are less fortunate. At core, all of our faith traditions are concerned with the issue of *justice*, especially justice for the poor.

Third, a concern for *community*, built on the values of *truth* and *integrity* are at the core of all of our faith traditions. Ethical conduct within the cultures we reside is a concern of all religions. To cheat a brother or sister in the faith, or to build a life upon a web of lies, is unacceptable in the cultures of Christians, Jews and Muslims. The following words spoken by Muhammad during his “farewell pilgrimage” to Mecca and shortly before his death, sound as if they could have been written by the Apostle Paul in one of his *Letters* to the young Christian Churches: “O men! Listen to my words and take them to heart! Know ye that every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim, and that you are now one brotherhood...” These words echo Paul’s emphasis upon belonging to “one another” in Christian community, and are certainly a part of the traditional emphasis within the *covenantal community* of Israel, especially what is expressed in Leviticus 19:18: “...love your neighbor as yourself.”

When asked at the end of her presentation at Wayzata Church what we can do to help bring together today’s Christians, Muslims and Jews, Karen Armstrong said, “We should not talk about what we believe. We must get beyond ‘tolerance’ and ‘dialogue’ and *work together*. We must let our actions show what we believe, what we hold in common.” This is true. We must begin to *show* what we believe, what we hold in common. *We all seek a divine/human connection...justice for all...and community built upon the values of truth and integrity.*

Over the past few months a small group here in Minnesota has been drafting a statement that we hope will find support in churches, synagogues and mosques as we seek for ways that we can work together. We call it, “The Minnesota Mission,” and in simplicity and brevity it reads: *We come together in our interdependent world, of many races, cultures, and faith traditions, to learn from one another in peace. Respecting our differences, we seek a better life helping others as we would like to be helped.*

We do, indeed, live in a dangerous world, and it becomes ever more dangerous as extremists and fundamentalists continue to spew forth their own brands of divisiveness. For all of our sakes, and for the sake of the future of our world, may we begin to focus on those things within all of our faith traditions that unite us. *May we learn to work together.*

Faithfully,

James R. Newby

P.S. Each year at this time I invite the recipients of this *Letter* to contribute to the cost of its production. An envelope is enclosed for your convenience. *Thank you* in advance for your gracious support.