

*John Docherty, January 11, 2015*

**“The light shines in the darkness ...”**

When I first started thinking about this meditation, and where I might go with it, some weeks ago, it was supposed to be the first in the series of “This present darkness”. I originally thought I would use it as an introduction to the theme. That, of course, happened last Sunday instead, and it was necessarily wound up with the celebration of Epiphany, which coloured somewhat the tone of the message.

Then I thought I would use today’s meditation to start focusing on specific issues and speak to what I know best : refugees and the kinds of situations that produce refugee flows, along with our response to the needs generated by those situations.

Then, last Wednesday, the attack on Charlie Hebdo occurred in Paris, leaving a dozen people dead, murdered by Islamic extremists.

And I knew I couldn’t ignore it – I had to allow that event to colour the tone of what I might have to say this morning.

I’m not particularly a fan of Charlie Hebdo, and satirists of that kind that go out of their way to offend, provoke and ridicule whatever they happen to find objectionable. I think there’s a place for satire and humour (I’m a big fan of Monty Python, and the Daily Show for example), but I also think there’s a way of poking fun at something without the use of denigrating, humiliating, and otherwise insulting images or language.

But that said, I also believe that people have the right to find fault where they may, and express their opinion of what they perceive to be the foibles of those around them. Those of us who don’t want to watch, listen, or read, should be capable of turning off offensive shows, turning our backs on hateful speakers, or boycotting trashy magazines.

“This present darkness ...”

Given the events of this past week, it seems a providential choice of theme. We’ll be looking at how the darkness manifests itself around us, and we’ll be looking for evidence that there is nonetheless light somewhere, and perhaps exploring ways that *we* can bring light into this darkness.

As a group of Mennonite Christians, we have as our starting point a firm belief that this Book has something to say to us regarding being light in an otherwise dark

place. Our image of light versus darkness is taken from this Book, and this morning we read two of the scriptures that use this image.

But we're Mennonite Christians. We like this Book. We think it holds answers.

There are plenty of people around us who are either completely ignorant of this Book, or who categorically reject it as a reliable guide for living. There are plenty of people around us who would argue, and argue very strongly, that this Book, and the Qur'an, and the Torah, and any number of other religious texts are the problem, and not the solution.

There are plenty of people around us who would argue that "Religion" is the cause of much of the darkness around us, and not a source of light.

And, quite frankly, sometimes it's hard to argue against that position.

When three Muslim fundamentalist men break into a publishing office and murder 12 people in the name of Islam, one might be forgiven for thinking that Islam is the source of darkness.

When Christian fundamentalists support the death penalty or life imprisonment for homosexuality in a place like Uganda, one might be forgiven for thinking that Christianity is the source of darkness.

When an entire class of people in India is considered "untouchable" by virtue of their birth, one might be forgiven for thinking that Hinduism is the source of darkness.

When Sinhalese Buddhist monks fuel the fire of hatred of Tamils in Sri Lanka, one might be forgiven for thinking that Buddhism is the source of darkness.

When Sikh terrorists are accused of planting a bomb on an Air India flight, killing 300 people, one might be forgiven for thinking that Sikhism is the source of darkness.

When an Iranian Sharia court sentences a young woman to death for "sex outside of marriage" following a rape, one might be forgiven for thinking that Islam is the source of darkness.

When Christian missionaries take aboriginal children away from their families and abuse them in residential schools in an attempt to take the pagan Indian out of the child, one might be forgiven for thinking that Christianity is the source of darkness.

When an Afghan Muslim father murders his daughters to protect the honour of the family, one might be forgiven for thinking that Islam is the source of darkness.

When ... unfortunately, I could go on at some length describing a litany of horrendous acts committed by persons acting in the name of religious conviction.

I could paint, in painful detail, a gruesome portrait of religious intolerance, bigotry, hate, violence and slaughter that goes back thousands of years – and some of my examples would be taken from this very Book.

So if *I* can see the problem, it shouldn't be surprising that others would point to religion as the worst source of darkness in our, or in any other, time.

This is not to say that religion is the only source of darkness, but I think it might fairly be given a place of prominence precisely because the risk of darkness in religion is so dangerous. And it's dangerous because it is darkness parading as light.

All of the examples that I just listed would be justified by their perpetrators as attempts to be faithful followers of their respective religious beliefs. All of their actions would be presented as *right*, and perhaps even *necessary*. All of their actions would be touted as countering the threat of darkness, as they understood darkness.

So when I read a passage like the one we read from the Gospel of John : “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”, I tremble a little bit, because I know how we Christians have tended to understand darkness, and how we have tended to try to bring light into it.

We have historically tended to understand darkness as everything outside the Church.

Everything.

The powers and principalities spoken of by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians - the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Certainly those are part of our construct of darkness, and we pray and hope for God's strength and intervention as we resist the dark tendencies of our time.

But we have more specifically tended to engage with darkness as it is embodied by those who are outside the Church; those who are not Christian; or, sometimes, those who are not our particular stripe of Christian; or, sometimes, those who are our stripe of Christian, but who are somehow suspect because they don't quite seem to be as faithful as we are.

And our way of bringing light has sometimes tended to be to try to convert them to our way of thinking; to our way of being. Or, if we couldn't convert them, to burn them at the stake as heretics; or to push them away into exile; or to simply shun them, and leave them to their fate.

This is a very dark form of light that we have sometimes carried.

But, I think it is also fair to acknowledge that this is not the only way we have carried light. In fact, I would argue that, most often, this is not how people of faith, of most any faith, manifest the light in their lives.

For every one of the examples I used earlier to describe terrible things that have been carried out in the name of religion, I could quote other persons of the same religion, who would denounce these acts as unfitting of faithful believers.

For every gesture of violence or hate, I could list multiple gestures of support, compassion and love offered by persons motivated by their religious convictions.

Alongside the Afghan Muslim father who would murder his own daughter to protect the honour of his family, there is the Muslim father of Malala Yousafzai bringing light to her and her peers as he encourages her to seek an education in the face of intolerance.

Alongside the Christian missionaries taking aboriginal children away from their families, are the members of Christian Peacemaker teams, and workers with various other Christian ministries seeking ways to walk with and advocate on behalf of native communities.

Alongside Iranian Sharia court sentences are Iranians in exile who work tirelessly to bring pressure to bear on those responsible for these decisions.

Alongside Sikh terrorists accused of planting a bomb on an Air India flight, there is Ujjal Dossanjh, a moderate Sikh and Liberal MP speaking out against extremists in the Sikh community.

Alongside a rigid structure of "untouchables" in India, there is Mahatma Gandhi stating forcefully that "... if untouchability lives, Hinduism must die ... it is simple fanatical obstinacy to persist in persecuting man in the sacred name of religion ...".

Alongside Christian fundamentalists supporting the death penalty or life imprisonment for homosexuality in a place like Uganda, there is a movement among Christian communities to recognize and honour the commitment of gays and lesbians who worship with us.

And alongside the three Muslim fundamentalist men responsible for the attack on Charlie Hebdo, there is the rising voice of the Muslim community in France and elsewhere against such acts.

Immediately after the attacks, Dalil Boubakeur ,the Mufti of the Grand Mosque in Paris, issued this statement : “We strongly condemn these kind of acts and we expect the authorities to take the most appropriate measures. Our community is stunned by what just happened. It’s a whole section of our democracy that is seriously affected ...”

The Union of Islamic Organizations of France also responded on its website, writing: “The UOIF condemns in the strongest terms this criminal attack, and these horrible murders. The UOIF expresses its deepest condolences to the families and all the employees of Charlie Weekly.”

Hassen Chalghoumi, imam of the Drancy mosque in Paris's Seine-Saint-Denis suburb, condemned the attackers, saying, "Their barbarism has nothing to do with Islam."

Members of the Muslim Advisory Council to the NYPD denounced the shooting with the following statement :

“Regardless of motive or rationalization or evidence or excuse, killing twelve innocent people to avenge Prophet Muhammad has no justification and must be condemned without citing any victimhood. At this moment of national grief we ask the French people not to allow this senseless violence perpetrated by three terrorists to put a wedge between peaceful French Muslims and the broader public. We call upon the authorities to swiftly apprehend the perpetrators who should be punished to the full extent of the French law.”

The Muslim Council of Montreal also strongly condemned the massacre and said that nothing in Islam condones such violence.

Salam Elmenyawī, president of the council and a Muslim cleric, is quoted in the Montreal Gazette as saying “I want to make it clear that this has nothing to do with Islamic tradition or Islamic values and it’s certainly a very sad day to see people being killed for such reasons ... What we learn from our religion is that freedom of expression is paramount to everyone, as well as freedom of religion”.

As for me, I’m convinced that the problem with religion is not a problem with religion *per se*. Certainly, I don’t believe the problem with the religion of Christianity is with the message of Christ.

There is lots in this Book about Light; lots about compassion; lots about caring for those around us; lots about every way that we can make this a better world; lots about how to be faithful, in the very best sense of what that word means.

The problem with religion is with *us*. In some ways it doesn't much matter what this Book says. What matters is what we choose to take from this Book, and how we try to apply what it says.

We just don't always get it right.

In our attempts to be faithful, we are forced to balance our zeal for following what we understand to be the letter of the law with our usually incomplete and flawed understanding of the spirit of the law.

One of the commentators I consulted on the passage from John has this to say about what it means to be following the light offered by Jesus : (R.V.G. Tasker) "By this light also he [the Christian] is able to look inward upon himself, and to become conscious of the strange contradictions of his nature – his capacity for doing good and his propensity for doing evil, his heavenly aspirations and his earthbound desires, his reaching for the stars and his descent into the abyss, his hope and his despair, his piety and his godlessness."

This is our challenge : to live faithful lives, bringing light where and when we can; all the while recognizing that we just don't always get it right.

We can be blinded by our cultural filters; our family baggage; our natural tendency to want control; our need for power; our ignorance; our sense of entitlement; our willful blindness to the pain we cause as we move through this life.

But ... we are also capable of noble gestures of compassion, integrity and true faithfulness to the Jesus who said "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The question for us is whether we have been faithful carriers/purveyors/vessels of this light.