

## The Word, the Image, and the Creation of Otherness in Western Religions

Prepared for the First Unitarian Church of

Wilmington, DE, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

In our first reading this morning, the Dalai Lama said, "The source and cause of peace and happiness is the mind." And the Book of Common Prayer asks God, "May we with one mind and one mouth glorify thee."

So what can we do to apply these words of wisdom to understand our lives and the troubled world we live in? Both the Dalai Lama and the Book of Common Prayer, in their different ways, urge us to move from "unhappy divisions" to unity. How can we create unity and thus a greater understanding of our troubled world?

Since, according to the Dalai Lama, mind gives rise to all excellent qualities; it is mind that can give us the power to move from divisions to unity. The mind gives us discernment, but the mind without the heart is sterile. The heart gives us empathy, but the heart without the mind is limited.

However, when we unite the empathy of the heart with the discernment of the mind, we create great synergistic power—the power of understanding. And it is through the power of understanding that we can overcome the doctrinal divisions that we all heard about when we were growing up. We all heard that what Baptists believe is different from what Methodists believe; what Methodists believe is different from what Presbyterians believe; and that all Protestant denominations believe something different from what Catholics believe. And all Christian denominations believe something different from what Jews believe. We also know that terrible suffering has occurred, and continues to occur, because of such doctrinal differences.

(pause)

So this morning I propose that in the spirit of Unitarian Universalism we apply to the history of Western religion the synergistic understanding that comes from the unity of the mind and the heart. That is to say, I propose to discuss Western religions without regard to doctrine, and emphasize the one lasting distinction transcends all doctrinal differences. I have in mind the

distinction in the way religions treat the relationship between the word and the image.

To understand this matter, we may begin with the geography of Mediterranean basin, which has one bank that includes the modern countries of Spain, France, Italy, and Greece. The other bank is what we call the Middle East, and includes the modern countries of Israel as well as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco.

It was on this bank that Moses stood on the mountaintop a few thousand years ago and received the tablets on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments.

What interests us here, though, is not the Ten Commandments themselves, but what happened after Moses brought the tablets down from the mountain to Israelites.

Do you remember what the Israelites doing when Moses saw them? Well, they were dancing around the statue of a golden calf, which probably presented fertility. In short, they were doing what everybody else on both banks of the Mediterranean basin was doing—they were performing rituals in the presence of an image, a cult object.

Here is the Biblical account of what happened next, taken from Exodus 32, verses 19 and 20:

When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.

**20** And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

This remarkable sequence of events is an essential moment in the development of Western religion. Indeed--this is the very moment when Western culture begins, because this is the first recorded instance of the many subsequent confrontations between the image and the word. In such confrontations, which have formed Western culture as we know it, the bearers of the word consistently find the image threatening and attack it. Those who believe in the word define those who believe in the image as different, as "other." The creation of otherness in this way gives the believers in the word license to attack the images that the others venerate.

So when Moses ground the golden calf into powder, dissolved the powder into water, and made the Israelites drink it, this act began a new era of confrontation. It signaled a fundamental change in the very concept of religion, first locally, and ultimately in the Western world as a whole.

In the future there would be dancing on the other bank of the Mediterranean. There would be goddesses there; there was, for example, a ten-foot high gold statue of the goddess Athena in the Parthenon in Athens.

But on the other bank of the Mediterranean, where Moses had broken the tablets, there was no dancing, and there were no goddesses, because there the word had triumphed over the image. On the other bank of the Mediterranean there were only men writing books.

It was on this bank of the Mediterranean that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were all created. This group of three religions constituted a radical departure from all previous world religions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all monotheistic, text-based religions, and all three of them assert the primacy of patriarchal authority. They were the first religions in the world that featured that particular combination of characteristics.

It is the spread of these religions of the word—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-- that created the modern world as we know it.

As a test case of the spread of Christianity, let us consider what happened in Ephesus, a Graeco-Roman town in what is now Turkey. The main attraction of Ephesus was the great temple of the goddess Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

And around the year 53 the apostle Paul came to Ephesus and he began preaching there. We don't know exactly what he said, but he was surely preaching some variant of John 1:1. Who knows the Bible well enough to remember what John 1:1 says?

It says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." This key assertion of the primacy of the word in Christianity appears on the cover of your order of service. Paul's preaching of the primacy of the word over the image led to the second confrontation of the word and the image that we know about.

To understand that confrontation, let's restore the social context of Ephesus in the year 53.

Remember the temple of Artemis in Ephesus? There were silversmiths in the area of the temple who were making cult statues of Artemis, and they immediately sensed that Paul's advocacy of the word over the image was threatening their livelihood.

So they gathered at the obvious place to stage a demonstration in Ephesus, the magnificent 50,000-seat open-air theater. This theater still stands, and it is located in front of the agora, or public meeting place, where Paul had been preaching.

So we read in Acts 18:24-29:

A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen.

**25** He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business.

**26** And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all.

**27** There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

**28** When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

**29** Soon the whole city was in an uproar."

Ultimately, of course, the silversmiths, and the goddesses they worshiped, were defeated because the word triumphed over the image with the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity. So the Christians began doing what Moses had done, and what believers in the word usually do—they attacked images, which they defined as "other." As believers in the word, the Christians believed that images were "no gods at all."

One well-known result of the Christians' war on images is the statue of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, which some of you may know from its commanding position on the staircase in the Louvre Museum in Paris. This magnificent statue, one of the most famous works of classical antiquity, has no head. Why not? Not because it was broken off or damaged. In the presence of this awe-inspiring statue, early Christians felt, and feared, the power of the goddess. Naturally, then, they wanted to deprive the goddess of Victory of her power. So they sawed off her head.

And they didn't just saw off the head of the winged victory of Samothrace. They sawed off the heads of all the Greek and Roman statues they could find. You may have seen some of these headless statues in museums. These statues remind us forcefully that the beheadings that the ISIS terrorists are committing have a long history in the Middle East.

However, a curious thing happened when Christianity moved across the Mediterranean to Italy: The long-standing tradition of the image in Italy gradually overpowered the doctrine of the word in Christianity.

That is why in the early sixteenth century the world's greatest artistic genius, Michelangelo, is created the world's single greatest painting: the ceiling of The Sistine Chapel. It is something like the ultimate affirmation of a religion of the image.

Yet when a belief system reaches an ultimate stage like this, an imbalance results, and this imbalance is eventually corrected. Here's how that happened: At precisely the time when Michelangelo was working on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a visitor to Rome, an unknown monk from Germany, was about to change the Western world...

This was Martin Luther, of course. He came from Germany, which had a minimal visual tradition, so he was accustomed to experiencing words, not images. Moreover, Johannes Gutenberg's printing press gave Luther and his followers the chance to assert that "In the beginning was the Word" more forcefully, and to many more people, than Paul had done in Ephesus.

So we can conclude that all the variants of Protestantism (Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans and so forth) that have appeared since Luther are text-based religions created by primarily by Gutenberg's printing press. Predictably, then, the believers in text-based religions proceeded to attack images all over Europe.

Take the English town of Stratford on Avon, for example. Militant Protestants partially whitewashed the medieval decorations in that town's chapel in order to obliterate them. The whitewashing was supervised by the chief alderman of Stratford-on-Avon, a man named John Shakespeare. You may have heard of John Shakespeare's son William.

It's clear now that Shakespeare's genius benefitted from the rising primacy of the word in England. The King James Bible, for example, appeared in 1611, the year in which Shakespeare wrote "The Tempest."

Historically, then, Protestantism is a religion of the book and Catholicism is a religion of the image. To this day Catholic churches feature paintings and crucifixes, whereas Protestant churches do not.

But enough about Europe. What about America? What happened to the word in America?

When the Puritans came to North America, they often brought with them only one cultural artifact—the Geneva Bible. (The quotation on the cover of your order of service shows what the Geneva Bible looked like.) In the wilderness of North America, far from the images that decorated Catholic churches, the Puritans created the most verbal religion the world had ever known.

In conclusion, I want to borrow a phrase from Bob Dylan and bring it all back home. I want to talk about religion and the word in my hometown of Tupelo, Mississippi.

If the Puritans created a verbal religion in America, the Scots-Irish people who settled the South intensified American Christians' already strong belief in the primacy of the word. The Scots-Irish people in England had no visual tradition to speak of, and as a result the South as a whole has no visual tradition.

In the South, words matter, and images don't matter. For example, why do you think it is that Southerners believe that the Bible is literally true? When verbal people like Southerners read the Bible, they find no metaphors, and no myths. In keeping with the cultural logic of the South, Southerners find only words in the Bible, and they therefore believe in the literal truth of the Bible. This belief in the word above all else is the cultural logic of the South.

This cultural logic is all the more powerful because it remains unconscious, and as a result no one can talk about it.

For that matter, why do you think it is that there are no great Southern painters? Why do you think it is that there are no great Southern photographers? Why do you think it is that there are no great paintings of the South, although there are great paintings of every other region of America?

Naturally, then, Southern artists are artists who work with words: writers and singers. This is why the two most important white Southerners of the twentieth century were born within a short drive of Harrisburg Baptist Church, which I attended in Tupelo. I'm referring, of course, to William Faulkner and Elvis Presley.

So you can understand, can't you, why Southerners can't deal with things that have no words? For example, take the two most important equations in physics:  $F=ma$  and  $E=mc^2$ . "Force equals mass times acceleration" and "Energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light." There are no words in these equations, and therefore the verbal cultural logic of the South compels Southerners to dismiss equations, and ultimately science itself, as meaningless.

It is in this way that we can understand both the infamous Scopes trial about the teaching of evolution in Tennessee in 1925, and Southerners' resistance to the scientific evidence for climate change today. When we unite the heart and the mind in this way, we don't simply condemn Southerners anti-intellectual, because to do that is to define them as other. If we unify our hearts and our minds, we can understand the cultural logic at work in the South. Science is simply not verbal enough to make sense to people in a verbal culture.

Finally, I want to leave you with a thought about the relationship between the word and the image in religion today. We know that Moses destroyed the golden calf, and that at various times Christians have sawed off the heads of goddesses and whitewashed paintings. Today it's the turn of another text-based religion--Islam.

If we apply the holistic understanding of our unified mind and heart, we can interpret disturbing news stories, rather than simply react to them. For example, I'm sure you've seen some of the recent videos of ISIS guys with

sledgehammers and pneumatic drills in the process of destroying ancient statues in the museum in the Iranian city of Mosul.

Keeping in mind what we know about the relationship between the word and the image in the development of Western religion, and remembering that Islam—like Judaism and Christianity--is a text-based religion, we can say that these ISIS guys feel threatened by images, just as Jews did and just as Christians did in earlier times. These are examples of a general principle: Sooner or later believers in a text-based religion will attack images in order to establish their dominance in a given area.

And, finally, what about you? How does the relationship between the word and image affect your life? I leave you with some personal questions: If you have left the religion of your parents, as so many UUs have, do you continue the mindset of your parents' verbal religion? Do the visual arts of painting and photography matter to you? Is your own understanding of religion and spirituality purely verbal, or do sacred images matter to you? If so, how?

As Patrick O'Neal used to say, these are some things to think about while you're doing the dishes.

And finally, may I say "Thank you" for the great privilege of speaking here this morning.

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Our closing hymn is #108, "My Life Flows on in Endless Song." Please stand as you are willing and able.

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Closing Words:

May all living beings be well, happy, and peaceful;  
May they always meet with success; may no harm come to them, may be no difficulties come to them; may no problems come to them.  
May they always have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.

Blessed be. Namaste.

Postlude

Michelle and I walk down the aisle.

