

In December and January Elaine and I spent about three weeks on a trip to the Middle East, first to Jordan for five days, then to Egypt. Along with throngs of other tourists from all parts of the world we were enthralled by the artifacts of the past: the ancient civilization of Egypt, the Biblical world, the remains of the Roman Empire, the Byzantine and Christian civilizations, and the later Moslem world superimposed on all the above.

Reflecting on our journey, trying to put it all in perspective, I began to note that almost every amazing archeological sight we visited, indeed virtually every aspect of that world that drew us to make such a trip, was generated by the religions of those civilizations. Here in America we have spectacular deserts, high craggy mountains, rugged badlands, tumbling rivers, placid lakes, ancient forests, and lush agricultural valleys. We can enjoy sumptuous foods and charming accommodations right here in our own country. So what drove us to endure long travel and substantial cost? The places and the artifacts of religion that defined other civilizations. Without the motivating influence of religion there would have been nothing special to see or experience, nor to inspire our reflections. Frankly, I had never thought about the world in these terms.

How can I say that *religion* is responsible for the wonders we found in the Middle East? There are many perspectives on what religion means, but one of the best, in my opinion, was given to us by one of our great Unitarian Universalist ministers, Forrest Church. He wrote:

Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.

Ancient peoples became aware of this dual reality, and the Egyptians are the first as far as we know from written records. The Egyptians dealt with this dual reality by making elaborate preparations in this life to prepare themselves for an afterlife. In Egypt, all of the great temples, the pyramids, the solar ships, and other great works of art and engineering were propelled by one single principle — to prepare for a life after death for the prominent people of the realm. We find similar evidence and actions of preparing for life after death in many other, completely separated cultures — from the treasure-filled burial mounds on the steppes of Central Asia, to the monumental pyramids and tombs in Central America, to the great underground monumental and artistic works in China, and on around the world to the thousands of other works left behind by other ancient civilizations.

In Egypt we visited the great temple of Karnak -- the word “Karnak” translates as “the most perfect of places.” (In a few minutes I will show some photos of these places in the order that I am describing them now.)

After Karnak we visited other monumental sights in the Luxor area: the Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens, and the great Luxor Temple. The Luxor Temple, still being excavated and restored, has constructed to honor Amun-Re, or Ra, the creator god, the sun god, who first created himself, then everything else. The Luxor Temple was built over a period of 1,500 years (a period more than seven times longer than the history of the United States). There we walked through the breathtaking halls of pillars

and among the great high stone rooms with walls beautifully decorated in artistic depictions of kings, the battles they fought, of queens and children, of gods and monsters, with every space on the stone walls and pillars filled with written accounts of great deeds and records of the kingdoms. We, today, have no contemporary monumental works that can compare in scale or complexity to such a great temple. No photographs and no written description can convey the magnificence.

Then, from Luxor, we traveled on a Nile River boat upstream and docked at small towns along the way to visit other great temples: the striking temple dedicated to the god Horus at Edfu, the imposing temple at Kom Ombo on a high hill overlooking the Nile, and on to Aswan, at the first cataract of the Nile, where the Philae Temple of Isis was raised and preserved from the flooding of the Nile low dam. Then we traveled by air on south, upriver, to Abu Simbal near the Sudanese border where the amazing Temples of Ramses II and his queen were saved from the rising waters of the Nile high dam. Again, all of this massive engineering and artistic achievement was attained for the sole purpose of honoring the gods, including the human Pharaonic gods, and providing for their place in the world of the dead. All of those thousands of artists, engineers, and laborers toiled for generation after generation to serve the *religious* purposes of honoring the gods in order to prepare for the afterlife.

Later, near Cairo, we visited the nearly 5,000 year-old temple at Saqqara where the world's first architectural columns were invented. Then, at Giza, we visited the great pyramids, still an achievement of monumental construction that never has been equalled -- all built with great cost and labor to assure the blessing of the gods for the afterlives of the prominent.

In the many museums we visited we saw the richly decorated mummy cases enclosing the bodies, embalmed and mummified with great care -- a demonstration of the belief in future resurrection of the body, a concept that later found its way into other religions that were born in the region -- Hebrew, Christian, and Moslem. We saw the lifelike statues of those people who lived, and ruled, and worked 3,000 to 5,000 years ago. We observed their tools, medical instruments, their ornate chariots, and artistic decoration.

Also in Egypt we visited the sacred sites of later religions -- the underground churches where the first Christians worshipped as well as the modern day Christian Coptic churches where about ten percent of Egyptians still worship. We observed how the Christians desecrated the Egyptian temples they discovered, chiseling many of the carved gods off of the temple walls, and in some cases carving Christian symbols over the hieroglyphs. We visited one of the many desert monasteries built along the trail where, according to tradition Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus traveled for some four years.

In Jordan we stood on Mount Nebo where Moses viewed the promised land and where he died, according to Biblical tradition. A great medieval church was built on the site and pilgrims -- to include a 2000 AD visit by Pope John Paul -- have come to honor this great patriarch of the Jewish faith.

How Religion Defines the Path of History: Reflections on a Recent Trip to Egypt and Jordan
Bob Weekley, February 8, 2009

In the secluded and desolate canyons of the south of the Dead Sea we hiked among the monumental works of Petra, great tombs and structures carved out of solid rock in the centuries before Christ by the Nabatian peoples who had migrated into the area some three millennia ago. Again, the centuries of labor and sacrifice to build these great monuments were motivated solely by religious notions -- assuring a proper afterlife for those who had been noteworthy in this life -- kings, nobles, warriors.

In Jordan we swam -- or bobbed around I should say -- in the Dead Sea, the lowest point of elevation on the Earth, some 1,300 ft below sea level, at the southern end of the Jordan Valley. Nearby, the Dead Sea Scrolls had been found, ancient documentation of the religion of the Israelites. In Cairo we viewed the numerous great mosques, medieval and modern, great edifices of soaring religious architecture. [RUN SLIDE SHOW COVERING THE LOCATIONS DESCRIBED ABOVE]

In Jordan's well-preserved Roman cities at Amman and Jerash we saw the great temples built to honor the Roman gods, and we marveled at the later Christian and Byzantine temples built on the same sites.

Reflecting on this idea, that religion was the major motivation for this remarkable outpouring of invention and art, I thought of other great sites that people travel half-way across the globe to visit and experience amazement at the great achievements of early peoples. The awesome temples at Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the great Hindu temples of India, the monumental Christian cathedrals and churches throughout Europe and Latin America, the beautiful mosques all across the Middle East. And of more recent origin across the United States we see the ornate and majestic Mormon temples, the gothic stone cathedrals and churches in our great cities, and yes, Reverend Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral in California. Where would tourism be if it hadn't been for religion?

Religion, impelled by its focus on life after death, has left us an artistic heritage beyond grand architecture. Much of the world's heritage of art and music was bequeathed to us by religious motivation. Look at the great art of the Prado museum or the Louve and count the paintings and sculpture portraying the Christian holy family, the crucifixion, and the saints. How much of our musical heritage, from Bach to Gospel, has been inspired by religion?

Reflecting on other aspects of our visit to the Middle East, I was struck by how the religion invented by the ancient Egyptians became a model for other religions of the west. I already mentioned, as one example, the Egyptian invention of the idea of the resurrection of the body -- a theme later developed and expanded in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The Egyptians also invented the idea creating a holy place for the gods, a temple, built by man but imbued with the power of the gods. The temples we visited had their outer courts, their inner courts, and their "holy of holies" inner sanctum -- the same model that the Hebrew God Yahweh later prescribed for the Israelites to build according to the Old Testament. The Egyptians also invented the idea of judgement in the afterlife. We saw ancient depictions of judgement after death; they portrayed it as the weighing of the heart.

On more contemporary religious themes, we had many interactions with our guides and others on modern Islam as it is practiced in Jordan and Egypt. I observed many more women wearing the head scarf than I had on a previous trip to Egypt some 20 years ago, and a greater number of men who perform their prayer rituals regularly as evidenced by the discolored callouses on their foreheads. These outer signs of religiosity are referred to as levels of “observance.” In the countries we visited, the degree of “observance” is an individual matter. Within one family, for example, some members will be more highly “observant” than other members. Rather than thinking of “observant” actions as “good” or “evil,” it is merely a manifestation of how “observant” a person wants to be. The less “observant” people may still hold the same beliefs in the teachings of the Koran but choose not to follow the outward rituals to the same degree. This seems to be well tolerated, at least in these two countries.

One woman told us that her problem with the head scarf is cost; a modern woman needs many scarves to match her outfits and these beautiful scarves are quite expensive. From the standpoint of wearing a head scarf as a putative demonstration of feminine modesty, we saw many incongruous examples of a woman wearing her head scarf complemented by skin-tight jeans, spike-heeled boots, a tight blouse and heavy makeup. Go figure!

In the United States our constitution provides for separation between government and religion. In the Middle East where we visited, religion is regulated by government. In Egypt any new religious pronouncements (fatwas) must be approved by the government religious ministry. Churches of different denominations are permitted -- or barred -- by the government and religious practices must be government-approved.

Trying to assemble all my disparate thoughts on these matters, I am happy that as Unitarian Universalists we have come to the point where we are free to separate religion from spirituality. Religious practice, both here at home and abroad, past and present, is often focussed on rituals, sacrifices, the wearing of religiously correct clothing and symbols -- whether head scarves or crosses on necklaces, the performance of public prayer at governmental functions, the display of religious monuments in public places (such as the Ten Commandments). It is ever clearer to me that there is a vast gulf separating religious practice from spirituality. It has been the spirit of Unitarians and Universalists to make our religious practice a manifestation of spirituality. This view of religion is the one provided by another of our great Unitarian Ministers, A. Powell Davies. He wrote:

Religion is something that happens to you when you open your mind to truth, your conscience to justice, and your heart to love.

We can experience a sense of the eternal and the transcendent without the restrictions of dogma and threats of punishment for failing to follow ritual. We can continue our own search for spiritual illumination, for connection to the deeper meaning of life.

But, unlike the Egyptians, our spiritual practice may not leave great monuments of stone that will attract tourists 6,000 years from now.