

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage Unitarian
Universalist Theology and Spirituality

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Faith Watching: The Cult of the Victim

One of the most influential faiths in our society is the cult of the victim. The outlines of the cult beliefs seem to be as follows:

Some people are victims. They do not become victims by personal choice, but by events and situations beyond their control. The victim is helpless against the victimization.

The victim is sacred, and hence surrounded by strong taboos.

The victim is pure and innocent. It is taboo to question the purity and innocence of the victim. Anything that threatens to break this taboo is called "blaming the victim."

Assigning blame is a significant part of the cult. Blame must be assigned and none of it may be assigned to the victim. Blame may be assigned to other people or to institutions.

It is immoral to inquire about the details and interactions that occurred during the victimization. Such inquiries threaten to question the purity and innocence of the victim, and hence break the taboo and blame the victim.

It is also taboo to inquire if the victim found meaning or lessons for life in the suffering. The suffering

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must be meaningless and there must be no psychological or spiritual profit in it. Counting profits and losses would profane the sacredness of the victim with concepts of the market place.

The victim has a moral claim upon other people and on society. One must not examine this claim, for that would make the victimization be even more of an economic exchange.

To maintain his or her sacred status, the victim must maintain the required purity, innocence, and helplessness. It is desecration for someone else to question these qualities, but the victim may abandon them. For example, the victims of child abuse arouse our deepest sympathy. The abusers are blamed and are subjected to strong social and legal sanctions. Yet if the lore is to be believed, victims of child abuse grow up to be the abusers, so the two are really the same people.

Witch Hunting

About 1490 one of the most influential books in history was published. *Malleus Maleficarum*, or "Witches' Hammer", was written by two Dominicans, Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger. The book was scholarly and dry, but it led to the torture and death of hundreds of thousands of Europeans, mostly women. [See Walter Nigg's *The Heretics*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1962.]

The authors supplied these insights into witchcraft: The witch

has made a deal with the devil, accepts the devil as Master, practices sexual intercourse with the devil many times a week and gives birth to monsters. Witches kidnap children to feed to their offspring. (For male witches, the devil takes the form of an incubus.)

When witches go out at night to meet with the devil and each other, they leave a phantom body so even a their spouses won't suspect. They can fly there - it just takes a salve made from the arms and legs of children.

At their meetings, the witches curse God and worship the devil. Afterwards they engage in more unusual sexual practices than you would care to imagine. They feast on toads and human infants. The devil teaches them how to take the shape of an animal, curse people, make women barren and men impotent.

Heinrich and Jakob singled out women as "spiteful" "imperfect animals" "more concerned with things of the flesh than men," so it is no accident that more women are witches than men.

Need it be pointed out that these days we would find this book more instructive of the psychology of the authors than of the nature of witches? But psychology came five centuries too late.

When accused witches were brought to trial, they were asked whether they believed in witchcraft. There was a right answer: not to believe was a heresy. Then they

Witch Hunting, continued

were subjected to a careful interrogation about what they were doing in such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time before a misfortune befell so-and-so.

If the interrogation didn't sufficiently fluster the suspected witch into confessing, she was stripped naked and shaved of all body hair. Heinrich and Jakob wrote that the devil places a mark on the body of a witch. Any birthmark, mole, wart or blemish was evidence.

Torture was also available for eliciting confessions. The tortures not only inflicted prolonged, excruciating pain, but also left the body mutilated. And if they didn't confess? The devil must have given them exceptional endurance.

Witches confessed. Witches named names of other witches who also confessed. Witches tried to recant their confessions after the torture was over, but the judges were not receptive. The witches were burned, be they toddlers or grandmothers. Entire regions were left almost devoid of women.

But why should anyone be accused in the first place? The usual reasons: spite - neighbors are always getting into fights; envy; fear; righteousness; the chance to acquire the witches' property.

We claim to learn lessons from the past. What are the lessons we would learn from this?

The single most important lesson is that we ourselves are witch hunters. We don't use the word witch for them any more, but there are many candidates for persecution. Each of us is likely to persecute at least some of them.

These are characteristics attributed to the supposed witches: they are an organized conspiracy; they intend to harm other people; they learn techniques to carry out their evil inten-

tions; they engage in sexual perversions; they molest children. You should be able to find a cluster of these attributions associated with most groups being persecuted.

Moreover, the charge of witchcraft (whatever we are calling it) is unanswerable. There is no personal defence against the accusation, and for that matter, it is heresy to doubt that witches exist.

Gays? Accused of sexual perversion and raping and corrupting children.

Drug users? Accused of being slaves to the drugs, being criminals to support their habits, having irresponsible sex, and procreating children that they neglect and abuse.

Child abusers? This charge is the nuclear weapon of divorce proceedings and has become widely popular recently. Physical evidence needn't be offered. The "witch" needn't be interrogated until he can't think straight, the "victims" can be, but cross-examination of these victims would be cruel.

Racist? Another unanswerable charge in political combat.

Religious cultists? The information out of Waco seemed to dwell upon polygamy and on accusations of corporal punishment of the children. The Justice Department acted to save the children with much the same techniques and results as we used to save Viet Nam.

Do I mean to say there are no racists? no child molesters? no drug users? no cultists?

Of course not. That would be heresy. We have every bit as convincing evidence as they had of witches in the Late Middle Ages.

We all have our lists of groups that deserve to be persecuted, but we shouldn't spend all our time on attack; we ourselves are on somebody else's list.

Means and Ends

Does the end justify the means? The question wouldn't come up unless the means were somewhat unsavory, and before we justify unsavory means by some noble ends, we should consider some things:

First, there is an unbounded number of noble ends. Shall each of them justify doing nasty things? Are we proposing to live a life of nastiness?

Second, what if we don't achieve our end? It's likely we won't if the end is especially noble. Then how does the balance sheet add up? One noble goal is worth how many nasty acts?

Third, actions inevitably have more consequences than one. If we trample people in pursuit of our end, is that trampling an end we desire? And what about the next level of consequences that they will return to us?

Fourth, if we find ourselves trying to justify unethical means, that indicates we haven't considered enough alternatives. We should be able to find two or three ethical approaches.

But these are all rational considerations; they miss the point. Most times that we justify means by ends, the ends have a special personal meaning for ourselves. We seek a meaning for our lives by attaching ourselves to noble causes. The cause is like a breeze that billows our sails and animates our lives. The end becomes entwined in our identity and significance. The danger is this: when we find a cause worth dying for, it soon occurs to us that someone else's death would serve the cause even better. And so we sacrifice others on the altar of our own selfhood.