

Religion and Democracy

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Upheaval in the Middle East. The West is panic stricken. Its own political systems (the result of hundreds of years of slow evolution) lead it to believe that the will of the people is paramount. So the mob takes over. The West supports what it thinks is democratic change but in fact after a false dawn of moderation, gets a crueler, nastier regime, more autocratic regime which poses a far bigger threat to world peace. For its pains, or incompetence, the West is vilified and rejected.

Beware of what you wish for. This happened thirty years ago in Shia Iran. It happened with Hamas in Gaza. It happened with Hezbollah in Lebanon. It is happening again now in Egypt. I have no doubt that out of the turmoil it will be the Muslim Brotherhood that will eventually emerge as the government and the first thing it will do will break off diplomatic relations and repudiate the peace treaty with Israel. The same may happen in Jordan next. At best Egypt will go the way of Turkey; at worst, Iran.

Autocrats who lose the goodwill of the major part of their citizens are doomed eventually. But what do you get instead? It is often said that the Arab world is not amenable to democracy. The "Arab Street" is a primitive, prejudiced mob, lusting for revenge, not peace. Perhaps, but I wonder if what fuels this is just desperation. It seems to me there is a very powerful and disturbing religious undercurrent. In many situations religion often loses its domination when things go well; materialism wins. But when economic life gets tough, the fanatics offer the only hope—if not here and now then later on. Mubarak and the rest of them have failed in their corruption and their inability to improve the lot of the majority of their people. Religion is the obvious answer.

When nasty, corrupt strongmen are deposed on a wave of popular opposition, they are always replaced, perhaps not immediately but soon, by fanatical fundamentalist, clerically dominated absolutists like Hezbollah, Hamas—the sort of people who would rather shoot up and then demolish a Western-funded leisure center in Gaza than allow young men and women to have fun together. Yet many in the West would rather pat themselves on the back and feel good about supporting fanaticism, so long as it is in someone else's back yard.

But Islamic fundamentalism is not only a result of poverty, disillusionment, and political oppression. The Wahhabis spread their fanaticism from wealth and opulence in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps it is Arab inferiority, because it once stood proud powerful but now has been overtaken by others and all it has left is the wealth that nature placed underneath its backsides rather than its once vaunted intellectual creativity.

Islam was not always repressive. Under the Umayyads who originated in Damascus a thousand years ago, it spread enlightenment, tolerance, and civilization into the barbaric remains of much of the old Roman Empire. The

Abbasids in Baghdad and the Safavids, presided over one of the greatest eras of intellectual and poetic culture in human history. The Crusaders were a bunch of bloodthirsty thugs in comparison to the tolerance, dignity, and sensitivity of Saladin. The Ottomans under Suleiman the Magnificent looked down on the primitive intolerance of the Christian West and welcomed the Jews it expelled.

It is the mix of religion and social and political circumstances that is the powder keg. All religions have good humanitarian sides to them, but they also all have jingoistic, exclusionary, dark depths too. Religion itself is not necessarily opposed to democracy. There are plenty of examples throughout Jewish history and texts where the will of the populace has to be and was taken into consideration, and even monarchs being subject to constitutions.

Look at non-religious examples. Initially the West was deluded into believing that after the Soviet Union collapsed Russia could become a truly democratic state. In fact it has turned into a corrupt kleptocracy, the largest and most powerful mafia state in the world, where opponents of the regime are murdered or jailed, and justice is bought by the ruling powers and the corrupt new "upper classes".

Is China such a wonderful alternative? It might be dynamic materially and get the trains to run on time. But it supports violent and repressive petty dictators from North Korea, Myanmar, to Zimbabwe. It suppresses its citizens' freedom of thought and speech. It still venerates Mao, responsible for more deaths than any other figure in human history, a sexually corrupt, evil man. Are these examples we want to see spread?

All political systems go through upheavals and have their bloody consequences. The West is wrong to interfere. As Edward Lutwak has often reiterated, whenever Western powers intervene in conflicts and political situations not their own, they inevitably prolong the agony. Besides, supporting dictatorships elsewhere in the Arab world as the West does, its moral authority is nil. It might take a hundred years before the Arab world learns from its own mistakes, but eventually they will realize that neither violence, oppression nor fanaticism are the way to succeed.

In the meantime, the frightening fact is that Israel is now faced with the possibility of ideological enemies on all sides, ones that will call for blood. And I fear the appeasing West is blind. I am not sure that if Israel were invaded Obama's USA would come to its aid the way Nixon did. I fear the crazy world might cut the ground from underneath it.

You know by now I detest most of Israeli politics. I cannot stand fundamentalism of any brand and I want to see state and religion as far apart as possible. But if Israel is a mess, it is still a far more civilized place to live and thrive in than Hamasland or Ayatollah Hell. That's why Israel's Muslims, for all their disadvantages, would still rather stay put. For all its faults, Israel is a much better place for the ordinary citizen to live in than its Islamic neighbors.

But for some reason the world prefers the narrative of violent fundamentalism

to imperfect democracy. If logic won't help perhaps a little more fundamentalism might help them see the light of day! The agony of the Egyptians is, I am afraid, going to be prolonged and it won't be the Children of Israel's fault.