

“Nine Reasons for Unitarians to Oppose the Afghan War”

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Canadian Unitarian Council Annual General Meeting
Algonquin College Campus, Ottawa, 19 May, 2008

Don Johnston was minister of the Unitarian Church in Niagara Falls. Now deceased, he was well loved by his congregations. I know a couple who travelled 500 miles for counselling with him.

He told the story of his first funeral:

While in theological school, I was asked if I wanted to be the minister of a particular church. I wondered whether the salary would be suitable, and was told, \$70 a month.

I was dusting out one of the rooms at the church, making a study for myself, putting a few books in, when a man came to the door.

"Well, they're gettin' younger every day. Have you ever done a funeral service?"

I said, "No."

"Do you have a book of services?"

I said, "No."

"Have you ever SEEN a funeral service?"

I said, "No."

This fellow was the local undertaker. He took me up to a Congregational minister 16 miles away. That minister entrusted me with a leatherbound book his congregation had presented to him, with his name emblazoned in gold letters. I took it. We went to the cemetery.

At the grave, the undertaker told me where to stand, near the casket as it sat over the open grave. At the conclusion of the service, as he pushed the button for the casket to lower, the ground gave way under me, and I slid right down into the grave, with the casket slowly lowering over me.

He turned off the button, raised the casket, and helped me get out. I was all muddy, and was brushing myself off. As the casket was lowering again, I remembered that I had left the book down there, and so he threw his hands up in the air, stopped the casket, and told the people he would lower it after the group had left.

That was my first funeral.

So that's the kind of trepidation I have as I talk to you this morning about the Afghan War - staring up at a descending casket.

One of the perks of being 82 years old is that one has gone through a lot of history. Someone has said if we don't learn from history we are destined to repeat it.

In Afghanistan the Americans initiated or supported three regime changes in two decades:

In 1978 Afghanistan a Marxist professor, Noor Mohammed Taraki, led a secular socialist government which, according to Murray Dobbin, "affirmed the separation of church and state; labour unions were legalized; health care and education became priorities; women were given equal rights; and girls went to school." (Isn't that the kind of government we're fighting for?)

The USA didn't approve of socialism, so they brought about the first regime change, by training, arming, and financing non-Afghan Muslims, including Osama bin Laden. The Soviets tried to defend the socialist government, but the American puppets assassinated Taraki and took over in 1992.

Chaos prevailed. There was a lot of drug dealing, killing and mass rape. Finally a village prayer leader, Mullah Omar, inspired some of his talibs (religious students) to organize to stop the raping, and drug dealing, and corruption, which they did. They also stopped much of the poppy growing. These "Taliban" took over in 1994, and instituted very harsh Sharia Law which meant girls couldn't go to school, and other repressive prohibitions. The Americans supported this second regime change with the Taliban in charge. They gave the Taliban millions of dollars, overlooking their anti-woman policies - until - the Taliban government refused to allow a pipeline to be built. Overnight the Taliban became inhuman and cruel terrorists who had to be totally crushed.

So the Americans then started a third regime change. They transferred their support away from the Taliban in favour of drug lords again. Canada decided, "Well this third regime change of the Americans is crucial. We will sacrifice Canadian youth over there."

I'd like to suggest nine reasons why Unitarians should oppose the Afghan War:

1. The current shaky regime is not worthy of defending with Canadian lives.

The current parliament of Afghanistan does have a token group of women - about 27. But the vast majority are drug barons. 34 seats are led by one Hekmatyar Gulbuddin,¹ who, according to the NATION magazine, got his start throwing acid at women. He got 600 million dollars from the Americans. It is true that today in some areas girls are going to school.

2. From what I read, we are not winning the war, and we cannot win. The military ever tend to be over-optimistic. The portion of Afghanistan now controlled by the government: 30%²

¹ The NATION magazine, Oct 30, 2006.

² HARPER'S MAGAZINE, June 2008, page 15

Warfare for some is a kind of play activity - a sport.

A British poet, Alun Lewis wrote some words titled, CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY:

Big-uddered piebald cattle low
The shivering chestnut stallion dozes
The fat wife sighs in her chair
Her lap is filled with paper roses

The poacher sleeps in the goose-girl's arms
Incurious after so much eating
All human beings are replete.

But the cock upon the dung-hill feels
God's needle quiver in his brain
And thrice he crows: and at the sound
The sober and the tipsy men
Jump out of bed with one accord
And start the war again.

The fat wife comfortably sleeping
Sighs and licks her lips and smiles
But the goose-girl is weeping.

2000 years ago a prophet said, "Put away thy sword: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." ³

3. Rather than discouraging the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the war seems to be furthering Islamic fundamentalism, which is outstripping the secular forces in Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere. The reason perhaps is that fundamentalism is the only effective way people can resist U.S. domination.

The prophet Hosea said, "For they have sown the wind; they shall reap the whirlwind." ⁴

4. If I am not mistaken, about a third of our returning veterans are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Not only that, but apparently the Canadian Government is turning a deaf ear to their claims for medical treatment. "Sorry - you weren't there long enough - you don't qualify."

How many Americans died in Vietnam? Somewhere around 50,000. But an astounding result of that war is that of the veterans who returned, many more than 50,000 committed suicide! Why would these young men and women commit suicide?

³ Matthew 26:52

⁴ Hosea 8:7

We'll note just two stories out of Vietnam :

One U.S. veteran reported that his unit was ordered to destroy a neighbouring village. Why? To have something to blame on the Viet Cong.

Another story comes from the writings of the venerable Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. A U.S. helicopter landed in a field near an ox-cart. There were three people travelling in the ox-cart: a grandmother, a mother, and her baby. Some American G.I.s got out of the helicopter, went over to the ox-cart and by sign language, told the young mother to go with them. She handed the baby to the grandmother. The soldiers took her into the helicopter, which then flew away.

5. Our own news media don't have access to the war zones. We don't know - really - what our young men and women are being asked to do. We hope they are not as bad as the American woman soldier who with an attack dog was threatening a naked prisoner at Abu Ghraib. Now, this was likely a result of the indoctrination she received, but unfortunately she was the one who was blamed. Without press coverage, we don't know. Can we assume that Canadian personnel are different? Perhaps they are, but we do have the example of torture of prisoners by Canadian soldiers in Somalia. War does strange things to people, especially if there are no media to monitor the events.

6. Canadians are less safe overseas. My wife Bonnie has been travelling in Asia for some 36 years. In most government offices she visited, they loved Canada. "Oh, you're from Canada! Come right in!" Bonnie was proud of our reputation as a country who led the world in peace-keeping. She felt safe as a Canadian. She saw American travellers with Canadian flags on their backpacks. They felt safer.

But that all changed when Canada was dragged into George Bush's Afghan War. Canada has lost something very precious. Canadians overseas are now lumped together with what many see as war-mongering Americans.

Arundhati Roy is the Indian author who wrote "The God of Small Things." In a later book ⁵ she points out that "since World War II the United States has been at war with, or has attacked ... Korea, Guatemala, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Grenada, Libya, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan." That's sixteen countries. We can add the Philippines, Lebanon, Iran, Kosovo and Bosnia. and doesn't include other countries where the CIA has covertly wreaked havoc. Some might possibly apply the term war-mongering to the U.S.

7. The war is brutalizing the Canadian people. When General Hillier was criticized for turning prisoners over to Afghanistan officials to be tortured, Hillier's reply was, "Look, we are not babysitters."

Large numbers of Canadians now say, "Well, perhaps torture is OK if it can save Canadian lives." What about the presumption of innocence? What about due process?

⁵ Page 59, AN ORDINARY PERSON'S GUIDE TO EMPIRE, Arundhati Roy, Penguin, 2006.

8. Because of the war mentality, Canadians are losing our civil liberties. It is always in the name of patriotism that freedoms are suppressed.

Many of you are too young to remember the Dark Days of Senator Joe McCarthy. Back in the States we were really scared. A Methodist minister colleague was jailed for refusing to give names of people who attended his summer camp.

My name was certainly on various government lists of dangerous people. Apparently I'm not yet on a no-fly list.

We tend to forget Marshal Goering's statement after he was captured: "When a government wants to assume absolute power, they just point to an external threat. It works with any type of government."

The Unitarian Adlai Stevenson, during those McCarthy days gave a courageous speech to an American Veterans organization. He said, "You don't burn down the barn to get rid of the rats." Stevenson was applauded, but unfortunately he was defeated twice by Eisenhower. Even so, it was Eisenhower who at the end of his presidency warned Americans to beware of the power of the Military-Industrial Complex.

In Canada people are being harassed and intimidated. Just one example:

The high school age daughter of family friends⁶ organized about a dozen of her pals to demonstrate on Parliament Hill in support of Tibet - at a time when the Chinese community had several thousand demonstrating in support of China. Later on she was called on her cell phone by the RCMP, who wanted to question her. She said, "Well, I'm on my way to work." They picked her up anyhow and took her away in a black van and questioned her:

"Who was the organizer of your demonstration?"

She said, "I organized it myself."

"No, you're too young to do that. Tell us really who organized it?"

"I organized it."

"Why didn't you have a permit?"

"I didn't know we had to have a permit."

"Give us the names and phone numbers of the others in the demonstration."

"No, I won't give you any names."

"You realize that doing this kind of thing can go on your record, and you might have difficulty getting a job in the future." After about an hour of grilling she was released.

My understanding is that the police are not supposed to interrogate a minor without a parent present.

Barbara Coloroso wrote many wonderful books. One of them is "The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander." She said the Bystander has a responsibility.

⁶ These are close friends. I am in their home about once a month. I don't want to identify them here.

A famous bystander in Nazi Germany was Pastor Martin Niemuller, who wrote: "When they came for the Jews, I was not a Jew so I did not protest. When they came for the communists I was not a communist, so I did not protest. When they came for the Catholics, I was not a Catholic so I did not protest. When they came for the trade unionists, I was not a trade unionist, so I did not protest. Then when they came for me, there was no one left to protest."

9. Canada is spending billions on war that should be going to our childrens' medicare and education. Ontario is talking about a lack of trained workers - a severe lack of nurses.

Although I admit to being an oil consumer, the main winners to the Afghan and Iraq wars are the multi-millionaires who hide behind the names of their oil corporations and munitions companies.

What then should we do?

First, don't take my word for it that the Afghan War is a horrendous tragic mistake. Study it yourself. If we agree that the war is a huge boondoggle, then let's not be quiet bystanders. Canadian Unitarians, as individuals, as social action groups, as congregations, should become known as people who take a stand on the most important issue of our time.

There is precedent. When the Vietnam War was in full swing, some whistle-blower leaked the top-secret Pentagon Papers, outlining the real story of the horrendous things Americans were doing in Vietnam. Unitarians, through our *Beacon Press*, printed the whole thing. This was an illegal act. While the government was pondering whether to jail the Unitarian national Board of Directors, the *New York Times* took courage and also printed the Pentagon Papers. Unitarians played a huge role in turning the tide against the Vietnam War.

Some time ago I was on a committee doing a Vigil for Peace in a United Church. 500 peace marchers were coming down from Parliament Hill. We had a dozen speakers scheduled to speak for three minutes each. My job was to seat them in the choir loft, in the order of their speaking, so as to save time getting them to the pulpit. I had their names neatly placed on the choir chairs. One woman came in, and sat down in the wrong place. I made small talk with her, and then said, "Well, um - your seat is over here."

She looked at me and said, "It's all right. I'm an anarchist." My quick and agile mind considered several possible responses. But, in the end, I just laughed. I have always been intimidated by the weaker sex. Her name was Laurel Smith, from Vancouver *Homes Not Bombs*. In her 3-minute speech she had the entire audience standing and cheering. Do we have any anarchists here?

Closing Words from Walter Rauschenbush, 1861-1918 "A THEOLOGY FOR THE SOCIAL GOSPEL"

Since first the blood of Abel cried out from the ground that drank it, this earth has been defiled with the blood of man shed by his brother's hand, and the centuries sob with the ceaseless horror of war. Ever the pride of kings and the covetousness of the strong have driven peaceful nations to slaughter. Ever the songs of the past and the pomp of armies have been used to inflame the passions of the people. Our spirit cries out against it.

We deplore the spell of enchantments that make the nations drunk with the lust of battle and draw them on as willing tools of death. May we be of quiet and steadfast mind when our own nation clamours for vengeance or aggression. May our sense of justice be strengthened and our regard for the equal worth of other peoples and races.

May the rulers of the nations have faith in the possibility of peace through justice, and may the common people have a new and stern enthusiasm for the cause of peace. May our soldiers and sailors be commended for their swift obedience and their willingness to answer the call of duty, but may they be inspired none the less with a hatred of war, and may they never for love of private glory or advancement provoke its coming.

May our young men still rejoice to die for their country with the valour of their fathers, but teach our age nobler methods of matching our strength and more effective ways of giving life for the flag.

It is our earnest hope that all the great family of nations may be drawn together with an increasing sense of our common blood and destiny, that peace may come on earth at last, and that the sun may shed its light rejoicing on a holy brotherhood of peoples.