



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2017

Honorable Mention

"Mentors in Head Scarves"

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Mentors in Head Scarves

Linda Sarsour

Linda Sarsour is a social justice activist, one of the organizers of the Women's March on Washington, and the executive director of the Arab American Association of New York. Recently, in an interview, she said this:

"I am every Islamaphobe's worst nightmare as a woman who is Muslim, and empowered, and loud, and proud, and from Brooklyn, and I wear a hijab, and I run my mouth, and I'm on national television!"

A few days later, when Sarsour spoke in support of the students at Brooklyn College who booed right-wing political commentator Pamela Geller off the stage, her picture was widely circulated on right-wing media as an ISIS sympathizer.

Here was Sarsour's response:

"Before someone wants to paint anyone an ISIS sympathizer, know I would be the first victim as an independent, outspoken, and progressive Muslim woman."

The exact same qualities--namely, being an assertive, identifiably observant Muslim woman--earn her the ire of these two diametrical groups, Islamaphobes and Islamic fundamentalists. And what I want to tell you all today is that this is a problem not only for Muslim women who wear the hijab, but also for Unitarian Universalists.

But we'll get to that in a moment.

First, let's talk about another assertive, identifiably observant Muslim woman.

Ilhan Omar

Maybe you saw the inspiring picture, too, back in November of 2016, the one of Ilhan Omar, the Somali-American woman elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives. In the picture, she is getting sworn in. She is wearing a modest, elbow-and-collarbone covering black dress and a gorgeous tangerine turban. Omar embodies not one but five marginalized identities: she is a woman, she is Black, she is

a Muslim, she is an immigrant and former refugee, having fled the Somali Civil War as a child. She is also a mother, and young for an elected official at 33 years old. Friends shared and commented on the picture of her taking her oath of office, cheering and saying things like, "This is America!" and "This is why representation matters!"

There is much to celebrate about seeing a picture of a young, African American Muslim woman being sworn in to do the staggeringly difficult task of steering this country through these irrational, besieged, and fearful times. But before we get too self-congratulatory about being able to see the beauty of that moment for what it is, we need to take a good hard look at whether or not we are challenging ourselves to seek out the wisdom that she carries.

We are Unitarian Universalists. Sarsour and Omar are more than representations to us. Why? Because right there in the front of our hymnals, in the bylaws of our association, on the walls of almost every religious education classroom in any UU congregation anywhere in the country or Canada, are our six sources of wisdom, which claim that all the world's religions inform our religion.

Many Sundays and days in between, we feel we are doing justice to our sources--to the wisdom of the world's religions--by choosing a reading from Muslim Sufis Rumi or Kahlil Gibran, or Jewish Rabbis Baal Shem Tov or Hillel the Elder. We might even dedicate a whole service to the social justice theology of African American Christian Martin Luther King, Jr.

But friends, all those teachers are dead, and all of them were men. They were elevated among the sexes in their own times and in their own faiths. Their truths and lessons came from a very specific place, and don't represent the totality of Islam, or Judaism, or Christianity.

As religious liberals we believe that revelation--the unfolding of the truths that help us live better together on this earth--is ongoing and continuous. Unitarian Universalists hew to no calcified body of wisdom. Rather, we look to sacred texts and prophetic people of the past with a historic and pragmatic eye: What did this wisdom mean to the people who wrote and heard it? And what can it mean to us now, in 2017? As a Unitarian Universalist in 2017--this pivotal year of human history--what do the many and varied teachings of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and others have to offer us?

Let me go back to Linda Sarsour. Remember, she is the activist who is vilified by both those who hate and fear Muslims AND fundamentalist Muslims.

Here is another quote from Sarsour:

“I stand up for all oppressed and minority communities. This is what my faith teaches me to do.”

Of Omar and Sarsour, how does their faith sustain them? How did growing up Muslim help make them the people they are today? When they and their young families receive death threats, when people in authority willfully, even gleefully, obstruct their good work, what religions teachings sustain them, help them to dig deeper, fight a little harder, hold on a little longer?

We need to know this side of Islam. We need to engage with our sources not as closed books, but as living, breathing, justice-seeking people whose very lives represent the most relevant potential of those sources to do good in the world.

Prayer Veils

When I was young, and we would visit my grandmother who lived on the southern New Jersey shore, she would take us to Saint Joseph’s for church on Sunday. At my home church, in suburban Central Florida, none of the women wore prayer veils. But at Saint Joseph’s, a few women did. I remember being absolutely enamored of them--smooth lace that draped like long, diaphanous hair; scalloped edges that framed serene, beatific faces; a little personal holy space that those women made for themselves and God. If the girl saints had had sleepovers in heaven, I thought, surely they spent hours trying on and fixing each other’s prayer veils.

It was only later that I learned a common theological underpinning of the prayer veil, in the books of Corinthians¹ and Timothy² in the Christian Bible. Men, who are created in the image of God, needed no special covering to be in the presence of the holy sacraments. Married women, however, ought to wear head coverings to show that they accepted the authority of their husbands just as their husbands accepted the authority of the church. In other words, the head coverings showed that women knew their place.

¹ 1Corinthians 11:10

² 1Timothy 2:11 - 12

The Catholic church and I parted ways over these and other places of theological misfit. It was, as they say, a good goodbye, and I bear no ill will to my cradle faith, but I do sometimes wonder what might have been if I'd stayed. What would have been my reasons for or against wearing the prayer veil? If I decided to wear one, would the Bible verses about the head coverings matter as much as my personal reasons for wearing one? Would I just be fooling myself into thinking it was empowering, when actually I was playing into my own oppression? Who decides a thing like that? If wearing one helped me be more present, more meditative, more able to emulate the good parts of the lives of Jesus, Mary, and the saints, wouldn't I be adding a little, personal addendum to the official edict of the Church? Could it even be said that I was reclaiming something of the divine feminine within Catholicism, taking an old symbol and a very old text and creating something new?

Now, Unitarian Universalism has no teaching nor principle about head covering, or any aspect of appearance, for that matter. For us, the ways and means through which you adorn your particular embodiment of star-stuff is almost irrelevant compared to the ways and means with which you conduct your life and grow your soul.

But it turns out that sometimes these two things can be related. Sometimes declaring yourself an adherent to a particular sect calls us to our best selves. When we wear a Sierra Club t-shirt, we might be a little more likely to pick up the stray litter we see at the park. When we're on the street corner with other progressives and peace activists, holding a sign that says, "Love thy neighbor," we are less likely to be tempted to return the volley of obscenities shouted from a passing truck.

Declaring ourselves aligned with a particular group helps us hold ourselves to that group's highest standards. Women who wear hijab describe being keenly aware of representing all Muslim womanhood, unfair though that may be, and they love their faith enough to embrace the responsibility that comes with their representation.

There's another piece to this, too, that has to do with self-expression.

Chaya Lester

A few months ago, a poet friend sent me a link to a performance of American-born Israeli slam-poet and Kabbalistic Jewish woman Chaya Lester. Lester wears a tichel, which is a head covering that many married orthodox Jewish women wear.

She opens her poem “Got That Covered,” with an impression of the question she gets asked most by other Western women:

“...Can you tell me...what’s going on...around here?” (Gesturing to the top of her head in a circular motion.)

Lester says she can hear behind the question a gasp of post-feminist disbelief, “Oh my god, how can you handle the oppression of having that rag wrapped around your head?” In the poem itself, she explains how covering her hair is both a religious practice and a personal statement against the objectification of women and girls:

(Gestures to head again.) “These are the many strands of my quest against a society possessed by sexiness, where 12 year olds try to fill the holes in their souls with high heels, halter tops and rhinestone studded hose. I throw my hat into the ring to state the fact -- female power is found within. Judge me not by the color of my skin, and how much of it I uncover to win your attention...When it comes to self-expression, sister, I got that covered.”

Within the container of her tradition, Lester has woven herself a space for creative protest, for self-expression, and for rebellion. She calls her head covering her quest, a mission to embody a real and creative alternative to beauty and worth being determined by a culture that hyper-sexualizes girls and women regardless of their consent. In this way, Lester’s wearing of a head covering in public is a feminist act.

Does this challenge you? Does it raise your hackles a little bit to hear about exposing one’s body as exploitation and covering one’s body as an expression of personal freedom? That’s how it was for me, at first. And, I’m still working through what it means for me as a Feminist, as a woman in America, and as a UU. That feeling, that resistance--what Black Lives of UU’s Leslie Mac calls “the bristling”--is a clue that we have more work to do, more understanding to build. That’s the place where we need to do our work in order to be good faith allies AND to gain full access to our spiritual potential and legacy as Unitarian Universalists.

Crux

There is also a issue of relationship here. Right now, we Unitarian Universalists have positioned ourselves to get great benefits from the world's religions, but to share few of the burdens of being identifiably "not Christian." We can do better.

Since we claim Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and other world religions as sources of our own wisdom, then it is incumbent upon us to share the burden of answering for it to friends, neighbors, and family members whose ignorance and fear can be hurtful and destructive. We need to build up our own understanding of the theology and cultural practices around the world's religions, especially as they pertain to women, who are often the most visible and the most vulnerable to attack, physically and philosophically. We need to sharpen our communication skills and willingness to engage in dialog using facts, personal connections, and open hearts. We can deflect attacks and dispel myths, and we can support each other in this work in our UU communities.

Even orthodox and dogma-based religions have a leading edge, and I'm arguing that religious women are the ones out there walking it into being. It's not enough for us to teach our UU children the difference between a hijab and a niqab, or how pronounce Rosh Hashanah, or how Sikhism is the 5th largest religion in the world. If we are to live into the wisdom of our third and fourth source, if we are to recognize world religions as evolving texts, then we must raise our children on the stories of Mary, Vashti, Esther, Maharani Jind Kaur, and Judith. We come to know these women not as "characters from the world's religions," but as the archetypes who help cultivate our ability to see and assimilate the wisdom of the living women who are writing sacred texts with their very brave lives. We must let these living women's examples change us and change our faith, to help us discover the wisdom and power of our third and fourth sources. It is from those who make changes even while inhabiting identities marginalized within sects of their own traditions that we must learn. These are our teachers. These are our sisters. These are our warrior saints.

We have to be consistent, loud, unequivocal voices for racial, ethnic, and religious diversity in America. We have to speak up for diversity not for diversity's sake, but because we understand and have taken to heart the gift that is plurality. Because, in fact, the willingness and responsibility to understand and assimilate other perspectives is a distinguishing feature of OUR faith, we will not abandon our sisters in head scarves.

Closing

There's a poem that's sometimes used in UU worship services called "The Invitation," by Oriah Mountain Dreamer. Here's an excerpt:

It doesn't interest me
who you know
or how you came to be here.
I want to know if you will stand
in the centre of the fire
with me
and not shrink back.

Will we stand in the center with the religious women of the world? Do we know where the center is? If we don't, will we stop and ask for directions? With all that our faith of optimism and skepticism, love and disbelief, has to offer, will we also be present to the lessons of tradition and texts, mysticism and intuition? Will we go deep into our third and fourth sources? Will we move in curious and ego-less solidarity and truth-seeking as religious women of the world create the leading edge?