



## *Liberty for All*

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The Fourth of July is approaching. It is always a moment for sober thought. Again, because Nancy is the longest-serving member of the Cyprus Fulbright Commission, we've received the pro forma invitation from the US Embassy in Nicosia (a fortress and ugly monument to paranoia) to attend the annual reception. And again we have respectfully declined to attend in protest over the policies of the United States in the Middle East, policies that betray the vision of the Founding Fathers and the core principles of the American Revolution upon which our republic was founded.

Were we in The States on that day we would enthusiastically participate in whatever local celebration there was because we would be among 'the people' and not guests of the American government. We've even planned a party of our own with British and Cypriot friends. We will hang out our Wal-Mart-purchased Stars and Stripes, cook hamburgers on the Weber grill, stuff our faces with three-bean-salad, potato salad and watermelon, and sing the national anthem (not all six verses). The fireworks we will have to forego (sigh!). But for Nancy and me, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is a special day.

Without really planning it that way, we have just watched the stunning mini-series, *John Adams*, and we've been reminded again what a struggle it was that birthed the United States of America onto the world stage with its pledge that 'all men are created equal' and 'endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights'. The American Revolution and the framing of the United States' Constitution was a moment not only for the infant nation but also for the world. It gave the world a champion of liberty that proclaimed all peoples had the right to be free from tyranny. It mesmerized people worldwide from 1776 through at least until the mid-1950s. And, in spite of significant internal blemishes (the genocide against Native Americans comes to mind and the whole saga of racism), that was a magnificent achievement. The world has not forgotten.

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Since the agony of Vietnam, however, we Americans have lost our innocence. In his farewell address to the American people, President Eisenhower warned us about the growing power and perversity of the military-industrial complex for which violence and war is stock in trade. For all that a great many of the patterns of American imperialism were developed under his watch, Eisenhower's voice remains prophetic. Administrations since (with the possible exception of the hamstrung Jimmy Carter) have danced to the tune played by those against whom Eisenhower warned us. Not least of all in the Middle East (and especially since 1948) America has become slave to powers that have precious little to do with 'we, the people', and has become embroiled in 'entangling alliances' against which George Washington warned the fledgling nation.

It is interesting to note that those in whom Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of self-determination struck deepest root were Muslims and Arabs. Mahatma Ghandi and the movement of Indian liberation was also a by-product. Even Ho Chi Minh, not much later and noting America's heritage of liberty for all, appealed to the dying Roosevelt to support the Vietnamese in their struggle to remain free from French imperialism, a cause to which Roosevelt was partial (but against which Truman eventually acted). Madeline Albright is quoted as having said that "America is the indispensable nation," and many hope she is right in spite of the Lyndon Johnsons and George Bushes of this world. And it is not surprising that Muslims and Arabs long for this perhaps more passionately than anyone, and they may indeed understand it better too.

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The Arab and Muslim world is seeking to build for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Shaking up and reshaping the structures of the colonial past and coming to grips with the exploitative dictates of the forces shaping our global present are pressing challenges. Leaving to one side the whole mess in Iraq and Afghanistan, western-backed autocracies (such as Egypt) and the Israeli burr-under-the-saddle continue to plague. Financial manipulators cripple the world with rising fuel costs, the world food crisis and the collapse of housing markets in country after country. Even well-intentioned governments are powerless in the face of cynically manipulative and autonomous financial muscle greater than the GDPs of many countries. Guru-class economists are using the dreaded 'R' word not only in the United States but globally. Also among the issues being vigorously debated among Muslims in particular is how to reposition religion within the cultural, social, economic and political processes. They figure that the world's malaise is not simply material and political; it is moral and spiritual. With refreshing naiveté they propose that responsibly exercised religion cannot be commodified, marketed and controlled, and might actually be able to stand against the tide.

The old cliché has it that Islam does not separate religion and politics, insists that people bow uncritically to vested authority, and uses instruments of coercion and violence to achieve its ends. Without an identifiable and accountable central Muslim authority, the very shapelessness of this chimera is what inspires fear. Beyond poisoning social relations, this fear becomes the broken rudder of policy that has guided, among others, the current American administration.

That's what makes it particularly interesting to see, precisely now, that a new generation of serious Muslim thinkers is examining with renewed interest the American prophets. They want to know how America's founding fathers framed a nation's mandate so as to enshrine the secular ideal without casting religion into the dustbin.

Europe for its part largely separated religion from political institutions so as to protect those institutions from the corrupting force of religion; the American founding fathers, by contrast, separated the two in order to protect religion and the individual's free exercise thereof from interference by government. The one moved from an authoritarian top-down notion of social and political organization; the other saw the issue bottom-up in terms of human rights and the individual's freedom to cherish 'life, liberty and the pursuit of

happiness'. A more stark contrast there could not have been of what it means to live under the rule of law.

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And that's what interests these Muslims as they strive to tease apart their own heritage of over fourteen centuries. What they are discovering, somewhat to their own surprise, is that history gives them great leeway for experiment and conceptual recasting. They've no interest in throwing the baby out with the bath water, mind you. Their Muslim history is a treasure trove. But as they apply new paradigms to that many-faceted history they are discovering even deeper treasure.

Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer and once the functional British Viceroy of Egypt) is quoted as having said, "Islam changed is Islam no longer." My professor at the American University of Beirut, Mahmoud Zayid, used to reply with a wry grin, "Islam is what Muslims say it is." I've always liked Professor Zayid's response not least of all because it's true. And those who are speaking out today are proving him right.

For instance: they are getting beyond the banal hagiography of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and rediscovering the down-to-earth story of their past. Islam is not trapped in totalitarianism or the demagoguery that feeds violence and now terrorism. Muslims are free to challenge the formulaic pedantry of the traditional jurists, and the rote preachers and stagnated imams of the mosques. Islam, as the new generation sees it, begins with a profound respect for the human individual (*al-insân*) into whom God breathed his spirit. That human is custodian of all God's gifts — life itself, human relations (not least of all between male and female), moral virtue, law and decency, respect for another's person, property, dignity and integrity, knowledge of all sorts, and everything that God has created and pronounced good. In effect and at its core, Islam begins with the inalienable rights (and the implied obligations) of every individual on earth, a truth that is self-evident because endowed by that individual's Creator. Working the changes, that is a good basis for understanding what the American founding fathers expressed, and not a bad launch pad from which to pursue liberty for all.

'Working the changes', however, is easier said than done. Not everything inherited from the past will be jettisoned. Understanding the American founding fathers will not mean aping them. The process in which Muslims are engaged will be a 'revolution' of their own making; *they* will articulate it. Its product will certainly be something new under the sun. And it will not be monolithic. God willing (*in shâ' Allâh*), it will emerge with all the colors and vitality of the rainbow seen after the storm has passed.

I only wish that I could live to see it. All I am given to see is a tantalizing glimpse in this dawn time of ours. We are still in the teeth of the storm and the world continues to struggle toward 'liberty for all'. But isn't that what the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is all about in the end — a dream of people determined to be free and fruitful of good?

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.