

Oil Fields of the Soul:

The Psychological Dimensions of Middle East Conflict and Culture

Neil Douglas-Klotz

Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning

(The article is revised from a lecture given to the American Association of Humanistic Psychology annual conference in 1995. All translations are by the author.)

For the past two thousand years, the West has extracted, refined and harnessed the spiritual resources of the Middle East to create and fuel modern culture. From the articulation of European Judaism and Christianity to the roots of modern science strained from the Islamic world, from the early reactions against religious heresy to the later popular reactions against religious orthodoxy, all threads seem to lead back to the Middle East. Over the past century, the West has returned to the Middle East to extract, refine and harness its earth energy resources in the same way. In the process, it has found itself embroiled in conflicts which are deeply rooted in the indigenous spirituality of this portion of the earth. How do we make sense of what is going on there?

Like a person awakening from amnesia, the West returns to the Middle East with vague inklings of the childhood of Judaism and Christianity, with fear and mistrust of the little it really knows of Islam, with virtual ignorance about the many, varied indigenous spiritualities which did not become part of the so-called classical religions.

As drilling for oil continues, another sort of digging continues to unearth more of the hidden roots of Western religion in the form of ancient manuscripts like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library. At the same time, Western culture confronts the dilemma of survival into the "post-modern" age--its need for more and more resources fed by an addictive lifestyle which is killing the earth and maiming the next generation. On the deepest level, what does the Middle East mean for us in the West and for all humanity on the earth at this time?

My family has Jewish blood, I was raised Christian and I have spent the past 25 years studying both the esoteric side of Islam and Judaism in their broader contexts. My own Sufi teachers tended to interpret the word *islam* very literally--as "surrender to the Source of all Being and nothing else." They looked at the heart of every religion and found truth and unity there. So my own personal history unites the three major religious traditions of the Middle East. Currently, I'm actively involved in a fledgling movement to bring citizen diplomacy to the Middle East. Tonight, I like to share with you some of my process over the past 20 years in looking with fresh eyes at the Middle East.

To return to the image of oil: The West has returned in this century to extract oil from the Middle East to provide power for maintaining the culture it has created. In the process of extracting oil, we take what we want without honoring the earth from which it's taken. The same psychic metaphor has played itself out in the development of Western culture in relationship to the Middle East.

Put another way, the extent to which Western culture has been unwilling to look at its own Western religious roots in terms of an indigenous spirituality reflects the extent of its denial of the body and the earth. This is why I emphasize the term "native Middle Eastern" tradition: to startle people into thinking that the

ground of unity of these traditions is both beneath us, in the literal earth, as well as in the air we all breathe.

Whether we know it or not, we are all influenced by our culture's distorted version of Middle Eastern cosmology, psychology and spirituality. Here's an example of the mythic and psychological oil that was extracted and what was left behind.

From the very first verse of Genesis, we Westerners subconsciously learn the division of "heaven" and "earth." Whether Marxist or fundamentalist, we begin to act from this supposed gulf between an overly idealized utopia, which is unreachable and the human predicament, with which we are stuck. This gulf further alienates us from each other, from nature and even from our own bodies, about which we are taught to feel ashamed.

In this case, a beautiful, cosmological metaphor was extracted and refined into a divisive concept. The Hebrew words that Genesis uses for "heaven" and "earth" can in context be understood as the two major ways our universe has developed. "Heaven" refers to the way in which everything is united as though by one sound, one ray of light or one vibrating wave. "Earth" refers to the individuality of every being--the way that the universe has mysteriously produced such abundant diversity that no two clouds, blades of grass or faces are exactly the same. The Hebrew word for "heaven" refers to our sense of "we," the word for "earth" to our sense of "I." So one completely accurate way to translate the first verse of Genesis would be:

"In the time before time, in principle and archetype,
In beginningness, the One and the Many,
The unnamable Force behind the universe,

That which was, is and will be,
Established two fundamental ways the universe works:
The particle and the wave,
The “I” and “we” of existence.

How we deal with this seeming paradox is one of the big mysteries and challenges of life. In general, I would say that modern Western culture has focused more on the “I” than the “we,” and has not included animals, plants or the rest of nature in its sense of “we” at all. So in this native Middle Eastern tradition, which is built into the nature of Semitic languages themselves, the notion of individuality is not unimportant, but it is relative and embedded in the community.

As you can see, part of the difficulty the West encountered in the process of colonising the Middle East’s cultural oil was no doubt a language problem (as Wittgenstein talks about). The main Middle Eastern languages spoken by the prophets of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are very poetic, multi-leveled and open-ended. One word can have many different meanings. The words of a prophet or mystic in this tradition-- sacred words, stories, prayers and visionary statements-- were intended to challenge their listeners to understand them according to their own life experience. This is still a tradition of translation today in Judaism and Islam--that one statement can be heard or understood in several different ways.

In addition, in what I am calling the “native Middle Eastern tradition” tradition of mode of thinking, language not only carried meaning, but also vibratory power and the potential to affect one’s interior states. When these words are chanted or intoned, they awakened sensations and feelings that help

their hearers make sense of their many possible root meanings, of the wild mystery to which the words point.

So another background image that arose for me was the contrast between a meadow filled with wildflowers and a neatly clipped and cropped lawn. In gazing at the meadow, the eye can roam from color to color, in no particular order, each time always a new experience. The manicured lawn tries to direct our eyes in a particular way, to eliminate randomness, to make complex lines simple.

In the same way, the first line of the prayer Jesus is said to have given (usually called the “Lord’s Prayer”), in his native Aramaic language sounds something like this: *abwoon d’bashmaya*. The King James English has it as “Our Father Which Art in Heaven.” To be fully savored in Aramaic, it would have to be chanted and breathed in a way traditional to native Middle Eastern spiritualities that use Semitic languages. To attempt to properly translate all the possible meanings of these two Aramaic words as spoken by a native Middle Eastern mystic requires a chorus of voices, each spiraling around a meaning that can only be experienced. In my own translations I have tried to develop a form of poetry that would restore the oral, open-ended quality, which would have been heard by those who originally listened to the Genesis story, the words of Jesus and the words of the Quran.

This has been a bit like restoring the natural wildflowers, plants and trees to a particular piece of earth that has been over-cultivated. Each line of translation is generated by one of the root meanings of the words, but instead of calling attention to itself, the line spirals on to another so that the mind doesn’t fixate on just one meaning. Each seed is watered and grown to its possibilities, rather than kept in a locked box where it can be controlled. Here’s a brief example of what *abwoon d’bashmaya* can mean:

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos,
you create all that moves, in Light.

O Thou! the Breathing Life of All,
creator of the shimmering sound that touches us.

Respiration of all worlds,
We hear you breathing, in and out,
in silence.

Source of Sound, in the breeze and the whirlwind,
the roar and the whisper, we hear your name.

Nameless One, you shine within us,
outside us, even darkness shines when we remember.

Wordless Action, Silent Potency,
where eyes and ears awaken,
there heaven comes.

So one gift of hearing this tradition clearly is the ability to let prayer, thankfulness and gratitude be a fully embodied, personal experience always open to the wild dimension of life. The “I” and “we” of existence are held in a dynamic balance.

It would be easy at this point to pin the blame for limited views on organized religion. Statements of visionary mystics were “organized” into theological constructs, whether of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. But looking at

the long view, part of our predicament has to do with the way modern culture developed and refined organized religion to fuel its spiritual life. What we call organized religion is a relatively new innovation in human affairs, perhaps only two or three thousand years old. For at least ten or twenty times as long, humans participated in a more open-ended, nomadic spirituality, one that used healing, ritual, art, poetry, drama, dance and chant to make sense of their existence. Over the last two millennia, as humans moved increasingly into villages and cities, the way they organized themselves politically, socially and religiously also became more and more distinct, more individuated if you will. Even separating life into the political, social and religious spheres involved defining, sorting and limiting.

Organized religion does a wonderful job of defining who is in and who is out, what is a proper way of understanding the words of the prophet or teacher and what isn't. It does not, in general, have a large tolerance for ambiguity, mysticism or a spirituality defined by a person's own life experience. Organized religion is the cultivated field; spirituality is the wild landscape. I'm not saying that all organized religion is bad. Like our relationship with nature, however, many people want to re-evaluate what we've gained and what we've lost. Perhaps more importantly, what we can recover of the wildness that was there earlier? For many, this wildness represents possibility, creativity and enthusiasm for life, new answers to complex challenges rooted deeply in the human psyche. These are qualities that, at present, our modern Western culture doesn't particularly encourage.

So what else was lost when, during our culture's march toward modernism, it applied weed-killers to the wildflowers of native Middle Eastern spirituality? What else can we restore in our psyches?

For one thing, we can remember that in this tradition, every human being has a deep, rich sense of interiority that must be explored and befriended. As I see it, this is the gap that psychology has tried and is trying to fill in modern culture. The native Middle Eastern tradition adds some very powerful insights to the way we relate to our inner selves.

For instance, the Hebrew book of Proverbs speaks of an inner psychic process or archetype in all beings that gathers the various, seemingly separate, subconscious voices into the first sense of a harmonious and healthy “I.” This gathering, relating voice in the self is called in Hebrew *hokhmah*, which can be translated as the “nurturing breath from underneath and within,” or as Sacred Sense or Holy Wisdom. She is better known by her later Greek name, Sophia.

Using the open translation method I evolved to deal with these texts, here is her voice from Proverbs 8. Again, all the meanings in this translation come from the possibilities present in the Hebrew words themselves.

As the first principle of setting up an ordered existence,
this Universe Life Force absorbed me
Hokhmah - Sacred Wisdom
--Breath from Within and Underneath--
into itself.

Cosmic appetite combined with the power of density,
the desire to compress and condense,
and I--the first Interior Experience--
joined the journey from the very start.

In another place, Proverbs describes the process of creating an “I” like this:

From the primordial, chaotic “within,”
Hokhmah--the breath of nourishing insight--
has created a separate place to live:
By enclosing her unknowable, inner mystery,
Holy Wisdom has created an address for her temple.

She has done this by dividing the Dark,
pushing from outside until the
foundations of her dwelling--the necessary basic “selves”--
join together by their own mutual attraction:
this natural union creates the first conscious “I am.”

Hokhmah’s voice comes through strongest in a text that usually isn’t linked to her, a gnostic scripture called “Thunder, Perfect Mind.” In typical fashion, most academic scholarship tries to link the Thunder text to neo-Platonic Greek influences rather than feminine Middle Eastern ones. However, many clues point to her unity with *Hokhmah*.

This voice is not merely a cultural oddity or an ancient archetype. Certainly she is part of the remnants of a Goddess mythology edited out of orthodox religion. Just as immediately, however, she continues to be the voice of our inner selves, trying to break through our cultural amnesia:

The Power sent me.
I appear in the minds I make restless.
I am found within by those who look for me.
If I disturb your mind with images, why not look at them?

If you can hear me in a sound, why not listen?
Whoever waits for me--here I am, embrace me!
Don't deny you've seen me,
Don't shut my sound out of your ears--or your voice.
You cannot fail to 'know' me, anywhere or anytime.
I am both what knows and what denies knowledge.
Be aware, this moment--
don't claim ignorance of this mind.

For I am first and last,
honored and dishonored
prostitute and saint,
experienced and virginal

...

I am the silence not grasped by the mind,
the image you can't forget.
I am the voice of every natural sound,
the word that always reappears.
I am the intonation of my name - *hu-khm-ah* -
the breath returning from form to its source.

Since there is no strict separation between what goes on in our inner and outer lives, Hokhmah also represents the voices of the dispossessed outside us, in our communities and nature, as Thunder's voice says:

Listen to my poor voices,
Listen to my rich ones.

Don't look down on me in the earth under your feet:

I compose the bodies of those who come after you.

Don't look away from me in the shit-pile:

I am the remnants of great civilizations.

...

Do not turn your back on my weakness

or fear my power.

Why despise me when I am afraid

or curse me when I am inflated?

I am she who shudders in all your fears and

who shakes in your moments of power.

I am the one in you who becomes sick and

I am the one who is completely healthy.

I am no sensation and I am the Sense,

the Wisdom of all.

We ignore these voices at our peril, as the increasing prevalence of Multiple Personality Disorders in our society witnesses. Not only do individuals experience this alienation of a fragmented self, so does society as a whole. Those who experience the breakdown of a unified "I" in our society, mostly from early traumatic abuse, point to the way in which our entire cultural self has become fragmented and alienated from each other and nature.

Hokhmah gives only one solution, which again can be taken psychologically and socially simultaneously:

Embrace me from the place in you

that understands and that grieves,

from the place that seems ugly and in ruin,

from the self that steals from its neighbors
though they are really no better off.

From the self that feels shame,
embrace me shamelessly.

From the middle of shame and shamelessness,
the place where grandiosity and depression merge,
find a center that brings sense and order
to all my dismembered members in you.

Advance together to me:
you who know my unity and disunity,
the One Self or my separate selves.
Bring the “great,” the spiritual Self
to live among the small, the animal selves.

Advance together to childhood:
the small, the simple, the poor
living with
the great, the complex, the rich.
Don't isolate “great” from “small,”
“rich” from “poor” within you.
By one you know the other
and none can live in health divided.

In the native Middle Eastern tradition, as we gather our inner selves, we create a soul. As they scatter, we lose our souls. Am I saying that making peace within ourselves has something to do with peace in the Middle East? That is

exactly what I'm saying. Until we do this, whatever we attempt in the way of either diplomacy or forcible intervention will be fatally flawed.

To embrace all of the selves, inner and outer, requires us to re-learn how to love. Unlike English and European languages, the Middle Eastern ones have many different words for what we call *love*. This rich expression of relatedness was also a casualty when our cultural oil and ore was extracted from Middle Eastern earth.

For instance, in his native Aramaic language Jesus uses several different words for love. One type, an unconditional acceptance, should describe our relationship to our inner, subconscious self (or *naphsha*, as the word stands in the Aramaic language Gospels). We are advised to love our inner self the same way we love the one who is mysteriously drawn to live near us on the outside, our "neighbor."

When we are advised to "love" our enemy, however, a different word and strategy is proposed. In fact, the word enemy itself simply means "one who is out of rhythm with you." Here is one alternative version of this saying, again an open translation based on the Aramaic words themselves:

From a hidden place,
unite with your enemies from the inside,
fill the inner void that makes them swell outwardly and fall
out of rhythm: instead of progressing, step by step,
they stop and start harshly,
out of time with you.

Bring yourself back into rhythm within.

Find the movement that mates with theirs--

like two lovers creating life from dust.

Do this work in secret, so they don't know.

This kind of live creates, it doesn't emote.

Another casualty when the spiritual oil was extracted from the Middle East has to do with our relationship to the body. In this area, the sense of wildness in all the texts was limited, reduced and repressed during the development of Western culture. This was especially so for their expression of sexuality. As somatic psychology pioneer the Austrian-American Wilhelm Reich pointed out, it is easier to manage people and to control them when their sexuality is controlled or diverted into being a commodity that can be bought and sold.

One place where the language of passion and desire could barely be contained was in the Hebrew Song of Songs. Yet even here, I found a much richer, more multi-leveled expression of the interplay between erotic love, passion, desire and abiding love than in any current translation. In these dialogues, not only does Lover speak to Beloved, but also the various parts of the self speak to each other. In the following selection, the voice is female; however at many moments the Hebrew is ambiguous about whether we have a male and female voice, or two female voices.

Who is this, rising like a primal plant,

growing with primordial energy

mounting the open spaces

and grasslands which spread freely?

Who is this restoring herself

upon her beloved--

leaning, resting, moving in a

regenerating wave?
Who is this mending
the vessel of love she has chosen,
healing the flower of her desire
like a medicine,
like a redemption of the moment?

I first aroused you below the apple tree,
I blinded you down in the chamber of dark fruit.
Inside there I astonished and desolated you--
within the light of that dark, fecund place.
Inside there, you were linked to the ancestress.
Inside there, you were brought forth in struggle
by all the women who have carried on life.

Toward the end of these dialogues, the voices talk about how to remember each other, how love and passion transform and mold one's psyche, and how love and physical desire are related to death. Again, this open translation tries to give some of the many levels of the Hebrew text:

Engrave my essence
like a seal on your heart.
Let my memory resound
through the core of your being.
Let me shine and rise
through the center of your passion,
through the fringes of your action,
through every part of you which
becomes a traveler and leaves home.

Engrave me like a monogram
which alerts everyone:
“This is the sign of integrity:
the strength of the cosmos
hides underneath.”

For this love that expands us
boldly faces death’s contraction.
This mysterious self-effacing power--
a double-strong, fully physical force--
is as audacious and potent as
anything with juice and sap,
as fierce and violent as
the withering, the decay
that returns us all to sameness
with the universal Self.

This blinding passion,
this jealous, envious desire that
possesses and redeems us,
this tense, compressed ardor
is as confusing and mixed up
as the world after physical death.
It binds us as closely as
the whirlpool of sensation and calm,
the abyss of delirium and peace,
the netherworld of questions and answers
which we find on the other side.

It sparks like lightning.
It spreads like the plague.
It burns like the fire
inside the fire inside the fire.
It radiates like the inside
of the first moment of the cosmos (Song 8:6)

Certainly one of our culture's great denials lies in this area. The myth of human omnipotence reflected in our desire to cheat death and control nature not only destroys our environment but also deprives us of the wild richness, the sense of immediacy of both love and passion.

This section concludes with the passage usually translated, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it." Yet the Hebrew text indicates that these are not ordinary waters. It speaks of the power of love to affect the purpose and storyline of the universe, as well as its chaotic, mysterious side, the one we will never fathom.

Not the many waters of the Great Dark,
the collected possibilities of chaos...
Not the rivers of Directed Light,
the vibrating stream of purpose...
Neither can contain or put out,
neither can overwhelm or drown
the secret power of expansive love.
Not the great passive flow,
womb of all chance...
Not the great active flow,
story line of the Universe...
Neither can understand or control

a love which wants to share life
more than it wants to possess it. (Song 8:7)

So the secret of love in this tradition is to hold it in balance with the remembrance of death and limitation. To remember that love has the power to transform not only our individual and collective psyches, but the whole universe. It is the wild card in our existence.

I have spoken psychologically so far, and you might be expected to ask the question, “What about the practical side? How do we deal with the mess that is the West’s relation to Middle East at this stage?”

First, it is good to remember the part of the Western psyche that is involved with the Middle East. What is “middle” for us in the West if not the oilfields of our own souls? Not least we are at present seeing the outcome of events brought into motion by actions of the West stemming back at least to the end of World War I, when the victorious Allied forces carved up the Middle East into spheres of influence for their own benefit, without consulting the people of the Middle East.

For what to do about it, I will relay the modest advice of one of my Sufi teachers, who excelled in being both practical and visionary at the same time. This was Samuel L. Lewis, himself a Jew and a Sufi, who before his death in 1971 presented a very simple peace plan for the Middle East, which distills to the following major points:

- 1) Establish a cease-fire for the entire Middle East as a starting point for the consideration of all boundaries and related ecological matters affected by them: water/ soil salinity, reforestation, natural resources including oil. This regional conference should address the following question: how could the entire region work together economically and ecologically? How can the needs of Jews, Christians, Muslims and all other minorities be met?

2) Denationalize all religious holy shrines, places and cities (like the Old City of Jerusalem) in the entire region (perhaps under UN auspices); make them "places of refuge" and establish safe passage between them.

3) Take up the question of all present refugees and occupied territories on the same basis, equally and dispassionately.

4) Parties involved should use words in a consistent way, not ignoring actual history: Who is a "Jew"? Who is a "Palestinian"? Samuel Lewis states: "If Israel is a "Jewish" religious nation, then it should recognize other religions. If Zionism is not Jewish but political and territorial, based on the Hebraic traditions of the principles of refuge, then it should also tak

e into consideration all displaced personalities."

5) The U.S. should withdraw military presence and establish accelerated cultural exchange to overcome its appalling ignorance of Middle Eastern peoples, which has consistently led to bad diplomacy in the area. I would add here that the same type of "citizen diplomacy" and exchanges used with the Soviet Union would make the quickest impact. Samuel Lewis concludes:

"What is the greatest need of the world? The need is for more love and also for more life energy... .The need for life can most easily be seen in the continuance of war on earth, that nations are fighting or preparing to fight, and often it is not clear what they are fighting about."

This is reminiscent of the end of Quranic Sura Fateha, a sura which is said or breathed five times a day by all Muslims:

sirat alladhina an'amta 'alayhim

ghayril maghdubi 'alayhim wa laddalin. Amin.

The orbit of every being in the universe is filled with delight.

When each travels consciously,

a sigh of wonder arises at the expanse, the abundance.
This is not the path of frustration, anger or annoyance,
which only happens when we temporarily
lose the way and become drained, roaming too far
from the Wellspring of Love.

###

All quotations are from:

Douglas-Klotz, Neil. (1990). Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Douglas-Klotz, Neil. (1995). Desert Wisdom: The Middle Eastern Tradition from the Goddess through the Sufis. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Copyright Neil Douglas-Klotz 2001
Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning
7 East Champanyie
Edinburgh EH9 3EL Scotland, UK
ndk@eial.org