

## **Noah's Backward Coverup**

### **The Problem of Pointing Out the Obvious**

**By**

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As a former Southern Baptist, I still find a lot of meaning in many of the old Bible stories, but there are a few I have much aversion to. One of them is the story of Noah's ark. It's been translated into many a picture book that appears especially enticing to kids because of all the wonderful animals in it. But many years ago, while still living in Louisville, I went to Petersburg, Kentucky to check out the Creation Museum; a 60,000 square-foot, 30-million-dollar facility that uses state-of-the-art animatronics, high-dollar special effects, and pseudo-scientific exhibits to promote a literal interpretation of *Genesis*, the first book of the Bible, including that the Earth is only 6000-years-old, was created in just 6 days, and was once completely covered by water in a catastrophic worldwide flood.

I happened upon its Noah's Ark exhibit about the same time as a little boy, around four or five years old. The exhibit included a model of the ark being tossed about on stormy seas, even as the waters were rising to drown a few desperate families standing upon the highest peaks of the disappearing ground. Horrified by the sight, the boy pleaded with his mother, "But what about the people?"

"They're on the boat," she said.

"No, the other people," the worried boy asked.

Without concern, his mother matter-of-factly replied, "Oh, those people. They're going to drown because they didn't believe God and get on the boat with Noah." The child fell silent, and I wonder to this day how that callous response from his own mother, well-meaning as she may have been, has impacted his psyche and emotional life. What does it do to a person to hear, "If you don't believe the authorities, they'll drown you and nobody will care or should care?" What does it do when people repeatedly tell us, especially when it's coming from those we most love and trust, "You better get on board or else"?

For me, the story of the flood symbolizes a widespread phenomenon occurring in our society today, a complete disdain for the past and antipathy toward those who represent it. Just as Noah builds an Ark, climbs aboard, decides who's in and who's out, then begins looking for a better place somewhere over the rainbow, an increasing number of us today are seeking to find Utopia by destroying everything about the existing world, including and especially it's past. As Polish philosopher and Statesman, Ryszard Legutko explains in his new book, *The Demon in Democracy*, about totalitarian temptations in free societies, especially regarding the similarities between liberal democracies and the communist society he grew up in, "Both are utopian and look forward to 'an end of history' where their systems will prevail as a permanent status quo. Both are historicist and insist that history is inevitably moving in their

directions.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, at the same time they believe they are history makers at a historic moment, they also tend to denounce all that is past history because everything before this magic moment in time has been part of the problem. The entire slate must now be wiped clean. Like Noah's flood, everything and everyone who isn't on board must end. As the forward to Legutko's book says, “It goes without saying that everything—in both communism and liberal democracy—should be modern: thinking, family, school, literature, and philosophy. If a thing, a quality, an attitude, an idea is not modern, it should be modernized or will end up in the dustbin of history...”<sup>2</sup>

Today, as I discussed a bit last week, what's modern is considered postmodern, meaning everything before postmodernism is part of the problem its adherents believe the world must now be cleansed of, including reason, science, empirical truth, and the belief in human nature—that there is something all people share in common that makes us one—all of which are values and beliefs rejected by postmodernism. Anyone who gets in the way of the progressive march toward its utopian ideal isn't allowed on the boat, especially if they work to remind us of our traditional values. As historian David Robinson says, “Consolidation is an act aimed at the future; there can be no consolidation of the past.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Legutko, this is another quality liberal democracy can share with the kind of communism he grew up under if it isn't careful. “Communism, as a system that started history anew, had to be, in essence and in practice, against memory,” he says. “Those who were fighting the regime were also fighting for memory against forgetting, knowing very well that the loss of memory strengthened the communist system by making people defenseless and malleable.”<sup>4</sup> I've personally discovered this is so due to the surprising and intense reaction against my book, *The Gadfly Papers*, which is largely meant as a reminder of Unitarian Universalist history and traditional values in light of what I consider its current move toward becoming an authoritarian religion seeking to control our independent congregations from the top down.

This, to me, is what the story of Noah's ark is about, the disdain for all things past indicative of a utopian mindset. The problem with it, as history has often shown, is that totalitarianism, or authoritarianism if you prefer, never results in utopia. Its empty promise of a perfect world somewhere over the rainbow can't lead us down a yellow brick road to our imagined Emerald City because once we get there, we discover there's just another authoritarian shyster pulling the strings. For authoritarianism, by its very definition, accomplishes its goals by robbing us of our freedoms, and, without freedom, no society is bearable, let alone is

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<sup>1</sup> Legutko, Ryszard. *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (p. viii). Encounter Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii)

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Legutko, *ibid.*, p. 9.

Utopia possible. Forcing societies to fit into our ideals, rather, only results in overwhelmingly punitive puritanical regimes maintained by fear and chronic policing.

In the story at hand, once the global flood waters finally recede, Noah and his family exit the ark and witness a rainbow as proof the destruction has ended and as a promise nothing like it will ever need to happen again. "I have set my rainbow in the clouds," Yahweh tells the survivors, "and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth... Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life."<sup>5</sup> Everything is going to be great now. It was difficult having to wipe everyone out, except for the handful of people on board with the program, the true believers. But that wasn't Noah's problem. He warned them what was going to happen if they didn't believe him. They could have saved themselves if only they had embraced his Utopian ideology, if they had been on board. But now, despite these hard choices, a new world was upon him, the old world had been cleansed of all its evil ways and, like Dorothy stepping outside the wreckage of her broken old house into the colorful land of Oz, Noah and his family can establish a brave new world, perfect in every respect.

Jump ahead, not a few pages, but to the very next verse after the rainbow promise is made and we find Noah drunk, passed out, and bear-naked inside his tent. So much for Utopia and its fresh start. When his son Ham discovers his father's embarrassing condition, he immediately goes out to tell his two brothers what's going on. "But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders," the story goes, "then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked."<sup>6</sup>

The problem isn't that Ham was lying, but that he told the truth about his father's drinking problem that nobody else in the family wanted to acknowledge. Instead of facing the matter, his more dutiful sons perform what they've inspired me to call "the backward coverup." Even worse than ignoring the family secret and pretending they don't see it, the next morning they tell Noah that Ham not only acknowledge it but tried to talk to them about it.

Boy was that a mistake, cause we all know what happens when somebody tries to deal with the family secrets. Instead of thanking Ham for his courage and coming together to address the problem, his father and two brothers prefer to just pretend it doesn't exist, to pretend the Utopia they sacrificed so much and so many for is still everything they dreamed it would be. "When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.'" Canaan is Ham's son, Noah's own grandchild. "He also said, 'Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend Japheth's territory; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.'"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Genesis* 9:13-15

<sup>6</sup> *Genesis* 9:23

<sup>7</sup> *Genesis* 9:24-27

That's how quickly this little communal experiment ends, with Ham and his descendants despised, oppressed, and excommunicated for talking about the problems with their society. Meanwhile, those who keep their mouths shut and uphold the status quo with backward coverups are rewarded with power, just as Shem gets to enslave his own nieces and nephews, the Canaanites, and Japheth becomes a land baron and legal owner of the homes his oppressed nieces and nephews live in. You see, in this story, Noah's three sons represent entire tribes of people who are spelled out as the it continues. By the time it concludes there are so many new identities that the human family is segregated into more than ninety different ethnicities, resulting in the Tower of Babel, people who are so different they can no longer understand each other. So, even after wiping out most the world, it ends up no better, even worse, then ever before. Destroying the past didn't bring Utopia, it didn't bring unity, it didn't end oppression, it didn't keep its empty promise.

Such failure is hard to hear, let alone admit, especially when we've invested so much hope and effort in fulfilling our dreams for a better, fairer, more just future for everyone. This was the case for many who put their utopian hope in Marxism during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today we have the advantage of retrospect to consider its impact in Russia and China, two superpowers that have dismal human rights records. But before the USSR and Maoist China were established, the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels represented the hopes of ordinary working people united across the globe. It's extraordinary, if you think about it, that millions of workers had established the International Workers of the World, the IWW, a global solidarity movement, before globalism existed, before the internet, before mass communication technologies. Yet they were united in their hope of establishing a world where workers were treated fairly, had rights, and earned a living wage.

Here in the U.S., Senator Joseph McCarthy formally accused those involved in what was essentially a labor movement of being Communists, and was able to officially persecute and prosecute many, including the beloved folk singer and activist, Pete Seeger, who was convicted and sentenced by the House Un-American Activities Committee, was despised by Republicans and Democrats alike, including Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, who tried to see his full sentenced carried out, even after McCarthyism had come to a shameful end, and, according to one historian, became one of "the most picketed, blacklisted entertainer[s] in American history."<sup>8</sup> No wonder it took Seeger, like many who had put their Utopian hope in the labor movement and it's promise of a new and better world, a long time to admit the failure of communism and to denounce the authoritarian turn the Russian government had taken.

It's hard hearing such things, and even harder talking about them. Those who dare are more likely to be condemned or exiled from society than listened to, just as Noah's son Ham learns

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<sup>8</sup> Dunaway, David King, *How Can I Keep From Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger*, Villard Books, Random House, New York, NY, 2008, Kindle Version, loc. 3799.

the hard way. As a liberal with liberal values, it's hard for me to hear about the pitfalls of liberal democracies. As a Unitarian Universalist, it's hard for me to criticize these same pitfalls in my own faith. But if we do a backward coverup, pretending they aren't there, condemning those who bring them up, we just end up with more of the same, not the Utopias we envision. We have no problem recognizing the issue with monarchy (one-person rule), or with oligarchy (minority rule), but how many of us readily see the potential danger of democracy (majority rule)?<sup>9</sup>

Gandhi, who said, "My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest,"<sup>10</sup> also said, "I do not believe in the doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number. It means in its nakedness that in order to achieve the supposed good of 51 percent the interest of 49 percent may be, or rather, should be sacrificed."<sup>11</sup> In short, if you are a minority, majority rule could be as tyrannical as any kind of government, maybe even more so, which has proven true for many minorities in U.S. democracy throughout its history. No wonder people who care about "the weakest," as Gandhi put it, feel the whole thing should be wiped clean so we can reset and start completely from scratch, just as Noah tried to do.

The problem is, just as it turns out for Noah, Utopia isn't possible, and we end up repeating, even magnifying, many of the problems we were trying to escape in whatever new world we fashion—oppression, exploitation, segregation, and privilege. In real life, I, once again, turn to the example of the noble labor movement seeking income equality, workers rights, and a living wage for all that ended up establishing two of the most authoritarian superpowers in human history. This is now happening in the U.S., as many writers are warning us with recent books like, Legutko's, *The Demon in Democracy*; Mark Lilla's, *The Once and Future Liberal*; Francis Fukuyama's, *Identity*; Anthony Kronman's, *The Assault on American Excellence*; Lukianoff and Haidt's, *The Coddling of the American Mind*; Philip Divine's, *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars*, and the list is mounting.

The problem isn't that we want a world that is more just and fair for everyone. We should all want and work toward such a world. The issue, rather, is how we go about achieving it. If, like Noah, some imagine an ideal world and are willing to destroy anyone who disagrees with their ideal, anyone who isn't on board with the program, then we end up with an oppressive society, no matter what kind of government we have. The solution is to hold and uphold certain values and rights that exist for everyone no matter who is in charge, a monarch, oligarch, or a democrat. In the U.S. we have a Constitution that's supposed to guarantee such rights for everyone regardless what any President, minority, or majority of us want. It's

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<sup>9</sup> Legutko, *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, ed., Krishna Kripalani, Continuum Publishing Corp., New York, NY, 1980, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

supposed to guarantee freedom of speech, a free press, the right to assemble, to practice our own religion, to equal treatment under the law, and so on.

We know what a struggle it's been to guarantee these values even with a Constitution. Our Supreme Court has repeatedly had to intervene by reminding us that every citizen is guaranteed these rights, including African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, among others. Let's hope it continues to do so. Yet imagine what our society would be like if we decide such rights are part of the problem and must get tossed out with everything else from the past so we can start completely over. Imagine if, as my critics say, reason is now a form of oppression that must go, that freedom of speech is now a form of oppression that must go, and that if you're not on board with these changes, then you must go to.

I'm not sure if I'm a modern-day Ham who has spilled the beans about a big problem and am now exiled because of it, or if, at age 55, I really am just an old man trying to cling to worn out ideas and obsolete strategies. I hope someday we can all sincerely talk about these concerns instead of some just being angry that I brought them up. Until then, I'm going to keep saying what I believe is true, that reason, freedom of conscience, and recognizing our common humanity are vital to the success of any community in the struggle for justice. If saying so, as I have been accused, really does make me a racist, homophobic, transphobic, hate-speech writing ableist, then perhaps I do deserve to be banished. We'll see what the imperfect future holds.