

Middle Eastern Peace and the "Sound Bite" Culture: On Tour in the USA with *The Genesis Meditations*

by Neil Douglas-Klotz
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Late last year, I found myself on tour in the USA for six weeks talking about peace in connection with my new book **Genesis Meditations: A Shared Practice of Peace for Christians, Jews and Muslims**. Needless to say this was not an easy thing to do. At my publisher's request, I jumped on a merry-go-round of radio talk shows, and even made it on a few tv shows (in one case, squeezed between a round of diet books, the latest news on Britney Spears and the weather). Several commentators asked me something like, "Dr. Douglas-Klotz, isn't Islam really an evil religion?" One asked me what I thought about Madonna getting involved with the Kaballah. And then there were the majority, who asked thoughtful questions about what role spirituality could play in on-the-ground peacemaking. There is certainly a lot of work to be done! Just breaking down the stereotypes that many people hold of Islam, Christianity and Judaism seems to be the work of a lifetime. Not to mention working with Western media's "sound bite" mentality, which encourages us all to make quick responses without really feeling or thinking things through.

On the good news side, just as I was completing the tour, I learned that **Genesis Meditations** was voted a "Best Spiritual Book of 2003" by *Spirituality and Health* magazine. Links to the full review, and any others that have come in since mid-November can be found at www.genesismeditations.com. The site also contains a sound clip of a live radio interview with Dr. Matthew Fox and links to the full color art

for the book by Fatima Lassar.

Speaking of sound bites, my publisher wanted me to simplify the basic message of **Genesis Meditations** for publicity purposes in few sentences. This led me to thinking about the way that stories—and the ways we hear them—organize our lives. For instance, if there were to be a nightly news report about **Genesis Meditations**, it might sound something like this:

“Today a researcher from Edinburgh, Scotland revealed that neither Jesus, not the Jewish prophets nor Muhammad believed in either a ‘judgment day’ or an apocalypse as most people conceive of it. Instead, they were focused on a living moment of creation at the beginning of time. According to the Scottish author Neil Douglas-Klotz, this misunderstanding resulted in everything from colonialism to the ecological crisis. His “Genesis Now!” theory, he says, provides a way for Jews, Christians and Muslims to find common ground and share prayer together. Klotz has already been criticized by fundamentalists of all traditions. But more on this story later....”

Humour aside, as I pointed out in the book, the stories we tell ourselves and the way we tell them, create our destiny. The stories that we hear on the news (even the story above) usually jump to conclusions and ignore principles. In the way they're told, they say that ends are more important than beginnings, where we're going and what we want to accomplish more important than where we've been. They become a part of a culture in which the 'ends' justify the means, and so even the means themselves seldom accomplish the ends they envision (like the radio talk show host who proposed to me that the solution to Middle East

peace was simply to 'kill all the terrorists').

Is there a way we can get beyond this sort of thinking, which leads globally to arrogance and more rounds of violence based on fear? Our shared creation stories don't give us a pat solution--that would be more 'end-gaining.' Instead they give us a way to approach each other and create the fabric out of which peace can come. We could see this the necessary psychological and spiritual training for our politicians and diplomats. Some of these 'outer' applications of the creation practice might be:

1. Beginnings unite. Endings divide. Let's focus first on the principles (literally 'the beginnings') on which we already agree, as well as on the many times and places where Jews, Christians and Muslims have and do live together in harmony. Too much modern diplomacy begins from the place of focusing on the very specific, and conflicting, goals that each party holds (the "billiard ball diplomacy" school).

2. Darkness and Light dance: what we don't know about each other could be our saving grace. We often presume that we know all about our 'enemy,' but in reality what we know is our stereotype of them. Darkness simply means 'what is unknown' in Hebrew; light means 'what is known.' When we allow ourselves to really listen to the 'other,' then darkness and light dance and new creation is possible. On the ecological level, allowing darkness to be darkness means valuing the wild in nature, and not feeling that we need to sacrifice wilderness for cultivation or human use.

3. When Darkness and Breath make love, their child is Consciousness. Rather than trying to control each situation, and imposing our own

solution, our own ideal world (or 'new world order') on the other, we need to allow ourselves to let go of the arrogance that we have the solution. If our diplomats simply allowed themselves to breath together, into their shared ignorance of each other, then genuinely new solutions could and would be born.

4. For new creation with Wisdom, all voices must have a place at the table. When Holy Wisdom issues invitations to her dinner party, she makes a place for everyone--rich and poor, high and low, light and dark. Only when everyone is welcomed to the table can new solutions arise and real agreement result.

5. The only 'original sin' is the belief that we know what is good for another. When we begin from the place that we think we know what is good for someone else, then we've 'eaten the fruit' that will put us out of the garden that we share with our own highest guidance as well as with our connection to the widest community of life.

6. Practicing our creation stories as an experience teaches us to value this moment with each other. Merely thinking about them displaces our attention to fears of a divided future. Ultimately, for there to be peace, diplomats and politicians need the same training in psychology and self-awareness that therapists do. They also need to learn how to sit in the seat of the 'other,' to understand another's story from their own point of view. Elementary training in breathing awareness and consideration of themselves as spiritual beings is essential.

7. First things first. Especially in the Middle East, this means (as Samuel L. Lewis pointed out) safeguarding the holy places of all traditions, that is, the places that remind people of their shared communal story and

their orientation to shared beginnings The direction of prayer, meditation and contemplation in all traditions is toward the source of wonder and devotion, the "Genesis Now!" moment. It is encouraging that one of the features of the Geneva (citizens) peace plan for Israel-Palestine is to place both Temple Mount and the Western Wall under international protection.

If we begin to do some of these things, then we might in the next generation eventually hear nightly news bulletins like the following:

“Today, the economy again remained about the same—it didn’t grow, it didn’t decrease, and it didn’t need to. The result was that 1000 species were saved, ten million trees and plants appeared in the wild again after fifty years, and a million more people received food, water and shelter. Our ancestors travelling ahead of us would be very happy: as far as our records go back, this is the most demonstrably compassionate day in human existence. The Gross International Compassion Index is at an all-time high.”

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(As a result of this work, the Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace has been created as an annual event in Edinburgh, Scotland during the first week of March. This festival has been jointly organized by the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities, EICWS, and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, EIAL. For more information, please see the websites www.eial.org or www.abwoon.com).