



# Moving toward Wholeness: Women and Religion in the Global World

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**Plenary Presentation at the Annual Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Chicago, July 25, 2005.**

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### **Judith Narrowe**

I began to write this paper right after the bombings in London on July 7th. I wrote very wild words about the two kinds of people in the world – those who are included and that's most of us sitting here, and those who are excluded. Terrorists, I suggested are those who are excluded, who feel or are made to feel that they do not or cannot or will not participate in the world at large, that is, the dominant West. That I posited is the cause of their anger and their subsequent participation in these vile acts of murder. They want to tell us – the so-called powerful ones – that they are angry and hurt that they are apart and are bent on revenge.

But I tore up those pages, or deleted them. I was getting nowhere with my anger, and was nowhere near our topic. So what I will do today is focus very specifically on our topic, most basically the concept of wholeness which I find challenging and problematic and somehow hopeful. And very vague. What is this wholeness we supposedly are moving toward?

I admit that I had a problem understanding the notion and needed the dictionary to help me. Webster tells me that wholeness is a noun which is related to the adjective whole and implies the

following: *a unity, that which is not scattered nor divided, that which is complete, entire.* I look around me in my complex world and wonder what in heavens name this can mean. Are we saying that we want to just get rid of the fragments and conflicts which surround, indeed envelop us? Is this kind of wholeness something that is possible, or desirable, or has wholeness become a kind of trendy buzz word, a comfortable reassuring platitudinous response of do-gooders to the fragmentation and complexity of our world? Put bluntly, wholeness-as-unity or oneness seems like some kind of cute dream, rather naïve and simplistic and without any real meaning in today's world. I don't see anything wrong essentially with splits, fragments, doubleness, even conflict.

These were my first reactions and initial questions as I pondered the title. Then I went on to think about the next two words in the title, 'women' and 'religion,' and found these equally challenging. Are these categories we can speak about or use in any analytic sense? As a practicing anthropologist, I know for instance that we can barely speak about 'women' - well, perhaps we can bring up bits of biology, and call ourselves 'female' and that might be acceptable, but in today's world, we must admit 'women' and the ways of being a 'woman' and of course a 'man' are understood as social and cultural constructions and are thus highly culture-bound. 'Religion' as a phenomenon is perhaps easier – belief in a supernatural being, but even here I am reminded of the endless discussions and debates among anthropologists regarding 'religion' and how we might define this slippery concept. Buddhism doesn't in fact posit the existence of a higher being.

Only the last part of the title, 'a global world' is easy, both as a phrase and a phenomenon. There's no questioning that the global world exists, neatly tied or maybe fettered together by the Internet, the oil industry, endless Chinese goods, travellers and migrations and of course Coca-cola and MacDonalds. We don't have to move toward the global world like we have to move toward wholeness because it is very much here. That kind of wholeness, global wholeness, if you like, is a fact that no one questions, though we all know people who don't like it, even those who attack it.

But what I am going to suggest – and this is the core of my talk – is that we need to find ways to make the global – the macro world characterized by the big stuff - financial, technological, and ethnic flows – whole. So I'm now going to look at this term as an aspect of the moral, the ethical, the spiritual and the local world. I'm going to try to eke wholeness of a new kind out of the trendy term, glocalization, where we are constrained to 'think globally, act locally. I will thus try to counterpoise the global – out there and rather impersonal – with wholeness – in here and essentially personal.

My argument begins by looking at three different spheres of our lives, or perhaps from three different perspectives – first from that of society in general, second from that of the many types of real groups all of us belong to – our multi-faceted personal networks, and third from the perspective of the individual. The first perspective is society in general, a phenomenon which the American sociologist Benedict Anderson called 'imaginary communities'. These are communities to which we all belong and which are composed of people we don't know but which whom we definitely have a lot in common. Most typical of these are the nation states in which we all live. The second are what I will call networked groups – people we know in one context or another and more or less intimately. These networked groups can include our family, our religious congregations, our colleagues, maybe members of our labour union, our ceramics class or bowling leagues and many others. My third perspective – and maybe most difficult - is that of the individual.

This as the framework of my talk: I'm going to suggest what wholeness might mean in each of these three contexts - national, communal and personal, and rather between the lines, how women and religion can contribute to this.

Let's start with 'wholeness' in 'society'. To illustrate my point, let me take you on a short trip to a large shopping centre in a suburb of Stockholm. We come in through massive glass revolving

doors, are immediately struck by the endlessly high ceiling – public space at its best. We're amazed, maybe shocked by the number of shops and the overflow of merchandise, we're tempted to stop one of the many food stands and aisle restaurants where you can choose to eat food from Thailand, Mexico, the USA, Italy, Japan – you name it. We also notice right away that we are milling amongst people of all sorts: they are blond and dark, some are half-naked with belly-buttons exposed, others are beshawled and covered and still others are dressed like me. They are young and old and fancy and plain and wheel-chair ridden and ambulatory. We take a breath and look up and see a banner stretched high across the main aisle on which is written in huge yellow letters, *känn dig som hemma*; feel like you are at home. Now what we are supposed to do, I think, is to regard all that hoo-hah, all these people-shops-food as a home. We are asked to regard that centre, that very complex and divided world, that multiplicity as something familiar, something we share, something like home.

The metaphor of a 'home' is very strong – very familiar to me as one who has lived in Sweden for 40 years. 'Folkhemmet' or 'people's home' was a term regularly used by Swedish politicians in the 1930s and 1940s to describe Sweden. In those days Sweden was more blond and blue-eyed, somewhat more culturally homogeneous than it is today. But there have been huge changes in the demography of Sweden – we are not so blond and blue-eyed any more – and we are having great trouble putting all these people in the 'home' and seeing our fellow citizens from 127 countries around the world as part of us and us as part of them. Thus the sign – *känn dig som hemma*, feel like you are at home, is a plea. The wholeness of a home, with all the sharing and understanding and togetherness and maybe common history which characterize the home, is still a dream in multi-cultural Sweden – and indeed Europe. Our media focus constantly on our societies as split societies, we speak endlessly of 'us and them,' but because we are democracies, we add to this something we think is positive - the excitement of multi-culturalism, the wonders of diversity. But the project is not working: we talk a lot about integration – and not doing at all a good job of it. Maybe that is why the banner challenges us to 'feel like we're at home' - because large numbers of us don't. Our challenge is to create a wholeness-with-diversity, not wholeness-as unity, and most European states, with their strong single ethnic-groups and their Christian histories are having trouble doing this. It is not easy to switch from equating nation as an enlarged ethnic group to nations as all sorts of citizens.

Yet – let's go back to the shopping centre – here the fragments, the diversity do come together but they don't lose their separateness; the many types/cultures/traditions do find themselves literally under one roof; they somehow belong to the same something – all paying taxes or obeying the same traffic signs or going to school. There is more inclusion, more sharing than we talk about, than we acknowledge. But instead of talking about inclusion, about what we share as fellow citizens, fellow shoppers, fellow mothers and fathers and grandparents, we have endless sessions about discrimination and lots of talk about 'our immigrants' and our differences. My point with my shopping centre is that there might be some wholeness, some coming together here which we are not acknowledging but which characterizes – or can characterize – our daily social lives.

I need to throw in some good anthropology here because I'm essentially talking about culture and what we might mean by this term in our complex societies. My colleague and teacher, Ulf Hannerz, a prominent Swedish social anthropologist who has been working with culture in complex societies for four decades, has suggested that we define 'culture' as a bunch of ideas, norms, and ways of interacting which people in a certain context share. Not remarkable. But he has a great one-liner which I want to share with you: culture is what 'I know that you know that I know.' It's all sorts of knowledge which we share but which we rarely talk about and take very much for granted.

Seen this way, some level of the wholeness is already here. We could and indeed should emphasize it a bit more, we should take a long reflexive look at what connects us – not only as citizens of nations but as citizens of the world. We should talk more about what we share as earthlings or homo sapiens rather than what differentiates us – all the risks we live with daily like

global warming and other forms of pollution, AIDS and other pandemics. And all the evils we live with – such as trafficking in women and children and narcotics and of course terrorism. My point is that wholeness in this socio-political sense is something which is possible, we have to work toward, something we have to consciously define and identify and strengthen. I'm not a great admirer of the UN but, as my mother once said, it's damned good idea. It pushes inclusion-with-difference, as does ICCJ, Doctors without borders, some religious groups, etc etc..

Let me get to my second context, not in the impersonal nations or societies we live in but our personal networks, the people we know and we need and we love. These networks are the source of most of the meaning in our lives. In these networks, there's more of that common stuff, more of what we know together and that we know that we know. Some of the links are chosen – colleagues, friends, maybe fellow choir members. And some are not – family, neighbours. But what is characteristic of these networks – and here is my point - is not so much who is in them but that the links go two ways – we both give and take. What I am getting at here is the importance of reciprocity in our social worlds and its contribution to generating or creating wholeness.

Let me push this a bit farther because I want to get to the problems with this reciprocity. Many years ago when I began to study anthropology, one of our favourite topics was 'types of societies'. We spent endless months learning to differentiate between hunters and gatherers, pastoralists, domesticated sedentary agriculturalists, system-dependent peasants, and of course industrialized urban so-called modern societies such as ours. The big difference between all these societies and ours – we posited - was that in them, the kin group was the basic unit of social organization and societies were devoted to tradition and continuity. Our societies, often called 'the West', were different in kind: here the basic units of social organization are individuals or interest groups rather than kin-related groups, and people choose their social contacts and their futures on the basis of their own needs and interests rather than their fathers' ideas. We are also devoted to change and progress.

So we identified a dichotomy, a binary opposition, traditional and modern societies, and we wrote many monographs describing these. We did so because we probably needed to categorize societies for analytic purposes and to do so they dwelled on many different dichotomies – of which tradition and modernity was probably the most popular. Nowadays we know that these sharp contrasts between types of societies is a bit overdone and very old-fashioned.. Today, we're trying to put dichotomies together because life is in fact managing contradictions, discontinuities, complications. A more realistic goal is trying to understand how human beings manage the contradictions of their lives, how we put together say, tradition and modernity, how we manage to balance off our rights as individuals and our obligations as members of societies.

This last bit is what I want to emphasize – the connection between communal obligations and individual rights and how to manage both. Let me take you to our Seder table on the holiday of Passover because I think I have a clue as to how to do this. We're reading the Haggadah, the text we read that night describing the exodus from Egypt and the ten plagues and Moses as leader and so on. We come to verse 16 in psalm 115 and I stop to think. The text reads: *hashamayim shamayim l'adonai ve'haaretz natan livei adam; the heavens are the heavens of God and the earth was given to human beings*. Here's the message and my modest midrash or interpretation of this verse: our task as human beings is to work on earth and be aware of heaven, to somehow put together heaven and earth, the values we see as 'heaven' and the challenges we are faced with – indeed, the mess we have created here on earth. The verse as I interpret it puts together a dichotomy – heaven and earth, sacred and profane, tradition and modern - and challenges us to make all these contradictory connections work. That's wholeness for me – putting together the oppositions, the contradictions of life, not choosing the one or the other. And here I've been able to latch on to a bit of Jewish tradition which I think can help us – or me at least – to do it.

Now to my toughest perspective: the individual. Here I'm going to bring in women – actually just

this woman - and religion – and how I can introduce a measure of wholeness in my own life. To do this I will have to take you to the synagogue. It is Saturday Shabbat morning and we are all standing in front of the open ark. We have just completed the Torah reading and are about to place the Torah back in the ark. The feeling of togetherness, what Jews have called ‘peoplehood’ in the synagogue is so strong you can touch it. The cantor begins the prayer: *Etz chayim hi...the Torah is a tree of life to those who take hold of it. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace. Then together, we sing: hashivenu adonai elecha v'nashuva, chedesh yamenu k'kedem: return us to you, God, and we shall be returned; renew our days as of old.*

As usual, we are praying in the collective, so typical for Jewish prayer. But I hear the verse as an individual and for many years, I was so disturbed by it that I was unable to join the singing. I found this verse unbearably nostalgic because I didn't know which years or old days we wanted to return to and I didn't want to return to any of them. Then one Shabbat, standing in the synagogue, I suddenly understood what the prayer meant: what we pray for is for God to renew us, to make us new, to let us see our present days as new. I'm not sure the rabbis would like this interpretation, but it works for me, and it is directly related to wholeness. It is not that I want to deny the tensions, the uncertainties, and return to some pristine time when all things were wonderful – such times never existed. What I want is to be able to inject a newness to my life, to see life-my problems- my situation anew, to re-appreciate, to re-connect. This is the wholeness I seek, a wholeness which is both an acknowledgment of the fragments, of the complexities, and a belief that I can put them together... Not easy, but not impossible.

Yet, and here is my point and my take on religion: the prayer we read when we stood in front of the ark, the prayer about making ourselves new, about re-newing ourselves does not exist in a nowhere, in another world. That synagogue and that prayer are not in another world. In a very real sense, all of our places of worship are intimately connected with various corners of the shopping centre or the public park or, if you will allow me, the global world. We are obligated to put the one into the other. The synagogue and the prayer are an integral part of a context and that context is our complex world, with its belief in progress and change and choice. There's another prayer in the Jewish prayer book which has a similar message: *Hashem mechadesh bechol yom maasei b reishit; every day, God renews the deeds of creation.*

A short summary thus far: I argue that wholeness is somehow achieved in our daily lives and daily relationships by inserting the eternal into the practical, heaven into earth, tradition into change. It is also achieved by seeing the world as a home, a conglomerate of fragments, held together somehow by the shared turf, the single roof. I've inserted some bits of the Jewish religion in these comments. But what can we say about women?

This is a difficult issue because we cannot place all these people in a box; there are women and women and women. We are not a group, barely a category, unless one sees a variety of common physical features as significant. What is tricky is that this is something relatively new in human history. Defining ‘women’ in the Jewish and Christian Bibles was easier. In our various Biblical traditions, women seem to be their biology. Their identity is closely related to being daughters, wives and mothers. The strongest focus is reproduction which seems to be the purpose of marriage and of being a woman at all. We all know of the many stories of motherhood or lack of motherhood – and the tragedies involved in this.

But most of us sitting in this room are women who have a few other equally important identities – professional, national, ethnic. Our wholeness – at least mine – is based on putting together these identities. I have no intention of choosing. And I can find some support in Jewish tradition for my idea. In Jewish tradition, we identify 613 mitzvot, commands. Half are negative and must be obeyed by everyone and half are positive and can be performed by all but must not be performed by women. There are three mitzvot which women must perform: *nida*, the ritual bath, *nerot*, lighting candles to introduce the Sabbath, and *challah*, what we commonly think of as baking the

Sabbath bread. Here's my midrash, my somewhat radical interpretation of this. It gives us an idea of wholeness and women and where we need to be: we need to be individuals, to care for our bodies and our souls, maybe our individual plans and dreams. That's the message of the very alone ritual bath (I am aware that some of you have a rather different interpretation of this mitzvah). Then we need to be very attached to our networked worlds – that's included in the commandment to light Sabbath candles in the home. Then there's the command to work for our world, the *tikun olam*. That's connected to the *challah* – long ago the contribution that women, assumed to be bakers, were to make to the priests, the whole world at the time, just a bit bigger now.

Wholeness, then, is admitting fragments and putting together contradictions, putting together all sorts of roles and identities.

One rabbi I know rather well suggested that we should define 'wholeness' as *shleymot*, the same root as the Hebrew word, *shalom*. He reminded me that it does not mean peace, it means wholeness. So I'm taking his word for it but am suggesting that wholeness is not very peaceful nor does it always feel good. It's pushing for and never forgetting what we human beings share under this globally warmed roof, it's insisting on our collective responsibilities as well as rights, and it is centred on a view of individuals as renewable... So there you have Judi, a citizen, a mother-wife-colleague-member of a congregation, and an individual, trying to renew myself, maybe not quite whole but managing.

See also parallel presentation by [Mary Boys](#).