

For and Against Religion

sermon digest

September 15, 2013

Isaiah 44:9-22; Acts 17:22-27

larry dipboye

Wednesday was September 11, the twelfth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the twin towers in New York, the Pentagon in D.C., and the Shanksville, Pennsylvania crash. Like Pearl Harbor, the day will stand in history as “a day of infamy.” In addition to emotions of shock, fear, and grief, the event stirred up a patriotic anger and zeal unrivaled since World War II and evoked sympathy from global neighbors, some as alien to our culture as Russia. The national anger seemed to demand retaliation, and we entered the unfamiliar territory of a “war on terror.” Unlike other wars, the war on terror lacked a clear identity of a national enemy and the location of a geographical battlefield. The name of the enemy was terrorism, or Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, or militant Islam.

For evangelical Christians immersed in biblical exclusivism, the enemy was clearly identified with religion, specifically the religion Islam. Rooted deeply in the Old Testament war of religions and the early Christian conflict with Roman paganism, Christians have had a long history of viewing non-Christian religions as enemies—enemies of the nation and enemies of God. One of the strange effects of 9/11 was a point of agreement between certain fundamentalist evangelical Christians and some fundamentalist evangelical atheists. (War always makes strange bedfellows, and this war was no different.) The “New Atheists” agreed with Christian fundamentalists that this was a war of religion. However, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris wrote best-selling books attacking not only the religious fanaticism of the Islamic militants; they attributed the radical actions of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 to the corrupt influence of religion, of all religions on human behavior. They argued in various ways for a world without religion described in John Lennon’s song “Imagine.”

When I taught a course on the New Atheists, I was not too surprised to find myself in agreement with some of the atheist observations of Christian history and human behavior. Jerry Falwell’s TV appearance with Pat Robertson shortly after 9/11 in which he attributed the attack to God’s judgment on moral, theological, and political liberalism in America was no less appalling to me than it was to the New Atheists. The Christian Crusades against Islam in the Middle Ages, the Inquisition, and wars between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland are no more appealing to me than to the New Atheists. But just as the bad behavior of individuals does not define humanity, the bad behavior of religions and religious people does not define all religion. Although the practice might be called the “common wisdom,” an anecdotal leap from one experience or example to a universal application does not meet the standards of basic human logic.

What about it? Where do you stand? Are you for or against religion? Does religion contribute to the good or evil of this world? Are you willing to look as critically at your own religion as you do the other religions of the world?

Religion is human. We are familiar with the old saw, “to err is human, to forgive, divine.” Basic to Jewish and Christian theology is the doctrine of evil that locates evil behavior in the mind and actions of all humankind. We have come to speak knowingly of original sin in Adam that has resulted in the universal sin of Adam’s children. Isaiah accused his readers, “all we like sheep have gone astray”; and Paul assured the Roman Christians, “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Is religion, or perhaps, *our religion* the exception to the human problem? In our age, we have to remember that *religious* is not a synonym for *good*. Religious people are not necessarily *good*. We can never forget that some Christians, some churches, and significant theologians in Nazi Germany provided both rationale and assistance in the attempted genocide of the Jews. We cannot possibly accuse Islam without gazing deeply into our own history.

Isaiah presents a case study in god-making. The Prophet dramatizes the human weakness of the iron smith and the carpenter. Incapable of rising above the need for rest, food, and water, the imperfect man creates a god in his own image. At least the humanist recognizes something worthy of honor in human dignity. Isaiah observes the tendency to worship down to that which is not only less than God, but less than self. The artisan cuts down a tree in the forest and uses the wood to build a fire to bake his bread and to warm his body. Only after the purely physical, selfish need of food and warmth are satisfied does the artisan turn to his need of worship. With the scraps of wood remaining

from his fire, he decides to make a god before which he worships and prays, "Save me, for you are my god." Isaiah resorted to ridicule. The idolater worships the scraps from his fire, a thing without life from which he asks for life. Worse than the irrational act of worshiping a lifeless block of wood is the deliberate blindness: "He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?'" Religion in the ancient world of the Bible was never viewed as a benign spiritual exercise. It was often a malignant distraction from the true and living God.

Theologian Alan Richardson makes the astounding statement that the entire Old Testament might be viewed as a treatise against religion ("Religion," *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 288-9). The Jews existed in the middle of a religious stew that constantly threatened to corrupt the unique faith which had set them apart from their neighbors. The threat of religious pluralism (a growing reality of the U.S. culture) led to hostility toward all gentiles, prohibition of marriage to foreigners, and even the justification of genocide.

The Roman world of the New Testament viewed all religion as valid for the people and the culture that produced it. For Romans, if one religion was good, two must be better, and inclusion of all religions must be the epitome of virtue. Paul's visit to the Areopagus of Athens and sermon on the "unknown god" reflected the Roman appreciation for religion and toleration of Judaism. Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire found a basis in their monotheistic religions for bashing the Roman Pantheon of deities. The basic principle of the Jewish-Christian theology was reflected in Isaiah, *anything subject to human will and power is not worthy of worship*.

The ancient world which produced the Jewish witness to God was never lacking in religion, but religious activity was never a substitute for holiness of life and fidelity to God even for the Jews. We sometimes overlook the self-critical element in Judaism. Sometimes even Jewish ritual was viewed as an abomination to God. Religion was the human quest for God. The universal phenomenon of religion, the basic human need to worship, revealed human more than divine nature; and the failure of religion was evident in the resort to manufactured gods. If the transcendent cannot be grasped, the human tendency is to make a god which is not only touchable and manageable, but portable and convenient.

God is good. In the Nineteenth Century Christian missions movement, Christians answered the call to go into the world. Now the world comes to us. It seems that we ought to welcome the opportunity rather than resent the competition. Roger Williams had insight for just a time as this in the Rhode Island experiment in religious liberty: "It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the word of God." Williams did not blandly suggest that all religion is equally good or that all religion is equally true, but that all religion had to stand or fall by the power of God.

We had quite a stir in Louisville a few years ago when the newspaper exposed Moonies in Santa suits soliciting donations from unwitting Christmas shoppers. They were exploiting the Christian season of good will. Shoppers, outraged by Moonies dressed in "Christian" disguise, began to question the cause behind the beard. The age of religious pluralism had arrived. The shrinking globe on which we live has totally changed the religious situation of my childhood. People who were worlds apart only a few decades ago have become neighbors through electronic communication, world travel, and immigration. Religions once identified with foreign cultures are growing roots in our culture. Martin Marty has observed that we have moved far beyond the Protestant-Catholic polarity of earlier days. His catalogue of religions in America includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Baba-lovers, Subud, astrology, and drug-cults. We might add Unidentified Flying Objects Cults, Self-realization Fellowship, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the New World spirituality.

Karl Barth was convinced that all religion—even Christian religion—is a Tower of Babel, a human creation to penetrate the heavens to find God. Like other serious Christians in the age of Hitler, Barth was disillusioned with the corruption of the state-run churches of Germany. Barth's contemporary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, looked away from the institutional church toward a day of "religionless

Christianity.” The problem was a church that had substituted religion for God. Religion often becomes another human institution protected and corrupted by human evil. Not only in Hitler’s Germany, but throughout Christian history the church has proven by the persecution of the saints that religion can be corrupted by human greed. Religion reveals the spiritual vacuum in the human soul which drives to be filled. It seems that in the absence of God humans will find some object of worship even if it is the mirror image of themselves. Institutional idolatry is always a threat to true worship. A major theme of the prophets was the futility of religious ritual. Jewish worship always stood under the judgment of God’s holiness. The moral behavior of the people was the measure of the truth of religion. Although humanity is flawed, God is good. God encompasses everything of worth in human existence.

While we are busy bashing other religions for their icons of worship, we need to take a look at ourselves. Nancy Duff notes the modern American idolatry of “Locating God in All the Wrong Places: The Second Commandment and American Politics” (*Interpretation*, April, 2006) . Her view of idolatry is a bit more sophisticated than Isaiah’s critique of god-making. She finds an essential idolatry in patriot fervor that assumes a divine destiny and absolute right.

In truth, there is no revealed religion on this earth. All religion is subject to human distortion and failure. At the same time, all religion is a quest for God and a sign of something of worth at the core of human existence. Our worship, then, is directed to the God of love, the God who transcends every human institution including our religion.