

Killing in the Name of God  
Living and Talking with Atheists  
January 29, 2011  
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It seemed appropriate that I spent this past week down in the Bible belt, in a state known for its fervent Christian religion.

This past week, I was down along the gulf shore of Texas with four friends throughout the country working on sermon ideas and studying some books that we read together. We also got to spend some time together just in retreat -- enjoying each other's company and sharing the joys and sorrows of ministry together.

Why I say that it seemed appropriate to be working on this Texas this past week is every time you got ready to walk into a business, you were confronted by this sign.

That says:

The unlicensed possession of a weapon on these premises is a felony . . .

As we continue our series on LIVING AND TALKING WITH ATHEISTS, we take up one of the central claims in Richard Dawkins' book "The God Delusion" and Sam Harris' "Letter to a Christian Nation"

They along with many other of this new breed of evangelical atheists argue that if society has a hope for the future -- a future without violence -- that we will all wake up and recognize God is a delusion and we need to move on with it.

I want to start this morning with a simple question.

DOES VIOLENCE COME FROM RELIGION?

Sam Harris writes, "the most potent source of human conflict past present and future is religion."

He goes on to suggest that it is going to require us waking from the nightmare of religious belief in order to save our planet.

Jim Walker, an atheist, describes Christianity as a violent religion. Then he goes on to describe it by saying: "I don't have anything against Christians is particular, I look at Christians just like drug pushers -- they are pushing things that are dangerous to the world, and I don't hate them but I wish they would stop doing it."

Does violence come from religion?

The answer, at first, seems rather apparent.

All one has to do is open the newspaper, turn on the TV, or read a history book and it would seem that the answer is a resounding YES.

Now I don't want to point fingers at other religious traditions this morning. I want to spend my time looking strictly at our own Christian past.

Some would argue that our central text the Bible is a very violent book.

Particularly in the Old Testament, the image of God is one of a violent and vengeful God. Next week we are going to spend time next week looking at some of the more disturbing passages that are found in our bible. So I am not going to address those today.

Without a doubt, Christianity has a very violent past.

Our founder (Jesus) was put to death, along with many others by state sanctioned violence.

Out of that violence --- our religion was born.

Just a couple of centuries later --- a Emperor by the name of Constantine, made Christianity the sanctioned religion of the state because he believed Jesus protected he and his troops and helped build his empire.

Eusebius of Caesarea and other Christian sources record that Constantine experienced a dramatic event in 312 at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, after which Constantine would claim the emperorship in the West. According to these sources, Constantine looked up to the sun before the battle and saw a cross of light above it, and with it the Greek words "Ἐν Τούτῳ Νικά" ("by this, win!", often rendered in the Latin "in hoc signo vinces"); Constantine commanded his troops to adorn their shields with a Christian symbol (the Chi-Rho), and thereafter they were victorious.

This was a bloody and violent time as Christianity and Empire joined together.

Probably the most common place that people look to the abuses of Christianity is in the Crusades.

I don't know how much you really know about the Crusades, so let me give you a very brief refresher course.

The main portion of what we call the Crusades began in 1095 and ran for about 200 years with the goal of reclaiming the Holy Lands, and particularly Jerusalem from the Muslims.

The Byzantine empire was under attack from the Turks and asked for help from Pope Urban II.

The Pope called the faithful to help turn back the Muslim horde and the Crusades were begun.

Pope Urban preached that God was calling the faithful to take back the holy places and restore the eastern portion of the empire.

Stories were being told of the atrocities that were being done by the Muslim Turks against defenseless Christians.

If you know this time period, you know that the Christian west had lost its centralized rule and that it had broken up into numerous minor kingdoms that were busy fighting among themselves.

NOW THEY HAD A COMMON ENEMY.

To inflame the masses even more, the Pope began telling how the Muslims were planning on desecrating the most holy site in Christendom --> the Church of the Holy Sepulcher --> the location of where Jesus was crucified and buried, by turning it into a mosque.

You can imagine how that riled up the common people.

Add to that, Pope Urban in his passionate plea to enlist the knights to participate in the crusade promised that those who participated in the crusade would be exempt from purgatory, all their sins will be forgiven and they will go straight to heaven!

Sounds familiar -- doesn't it!

This was basically a Christian version of Jihad

Unfortunately, the Crusaders, as they made their march to the Holy places in Jerusalem --> were rather brutal themselves.

On July 15 1099, the crusaders entered Jerusalem. and retook the city.

In Islamic memory, this event is much like 9-11 is to us.

On that day, the crusaders -- with Christian Crosses on their chests --- marched into Jerusalem and 40,000 Muslims were slaughtered. Some claim that the blood was flowing as high as peoples ankles. Men, women and children were slaughtered.

For the next almost 200 years the Crusaders continue to ravish Europe and the Middle East.

That is a part of our history, whether we like it or not.

The Crusades gave birth to another disturbing part of our history:  
The Spanish Inquisition.

The church had reclaimed Spain from the Muslims and as a result; Muslims and Jews were given the choice of converting or leaving the country.

Just to make sure that they really converted --- people's faith was tested often by torture --> all in the name of Jesus!

The shocking thing about the inquisition is that it did not officially end until 1834!

Over 2,000 people were burned at the stake and thousands others were tortured, some suggest over 100,000 people died as a result of the inquisition.

The violence perpetuated in the name of Christianity does not end there -- unfortunately.

The 30 years war, starting in 1618 was one of the most destructive wars ever fought in Europe and was waged between Protestants and Roman Catholics. 15 and 20% of the population of Europe was killed in this conflict.

The ongoing conflict in recent years in Ireland between Protestant and Roman Catholics seems to echo this war.

Even Hitler seemed to evoke God as justifying his cause when he said in a speech he gave in April 1922

My feelings as a Christian points me to my Lord and Savior as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned men to fight against them and who, God's truth! was greatest not as a sufferer but as a fighter.

In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and adders. How terrific was his

fight against the Jewish poison. Today, after two thousand years, with deepest emotion I recognize more profoundly than ever before the fact that it was for this that He had to shed his blood upon the Cross.

Certainly a distorted view of Jesus -- but we can point to so many instances when Christianity has been misused and see who they failed to really understand the message of Jesus.

Our own United States understanding of Manifest Destiny continues this distorted view of religion. Manifest Destiny is a policy that has been used to subjugate the Native Americans and to wage war with Mexico and Spain --- has in it the idea that we are the chosen people of God so that it is our destiny and right to do those things.

All we have looked at is Christian abuses, we have not talked about the ways Islam or other religions have also misused their faith in the name of violence. And we certainly could, couldn't we.

So is it very surprising that the new atheists suggest that religion is the cause of the violence in the world --> even if it is a distortion of what that religion proclaims.

In 1971, John Lennon released a song that is one of my favorites. The words echo this belief of the new atheists.

Imagine there's no Heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today

Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace

You may say that I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
and the world will live as one

So are they right?

Would there be no more violence if we could just do away with religion?

That is an interesting question. But one I think that we can safely answer with a resounding NO.

Face it we are a violent society

We love violent entertainment:

Football

boxing

hockey

Movies

Video games

We are self absorbed

If somebody hurts us or our family

we want to get even

That is not about religion

Think of shopping at Christmas

The hysteria of Black Friday → people have been crushed for a TV on sale

Driving

somebody cuts you off

How do you respond

evoke God's name but not quite the way the bible suggests

If religion is what causes violence --- then we should be able to look to places where religion is outlawed and see a difference.

What about those places.

It would seem that we could look to the Soviet experiment and Communist China, and if the new atheists are correct we should see a marketed decline in violence in those countries.

Dinish D'Souza writes in a Christian Science Monitor article:

In the name of creating their version of a religion-free utopia, . . . Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong produced the kind of mass slaughter that no Inquisitor could possibly match. Collectively these atheist tyrants murdered more than 100 million people.

We could spend all morning talking about the human rights violations and the deaths that have been the result of Soviet and China's anti-religion policies. But where would that get us?

It seems pretty obvious that atheism hasn't been a deterrent to mayhem and violence.

It hasn't created a more just and peaceful society.

It hasn't created the utopia that its leaders claimed it would.

I believe that the exact opposite is true from what the new atheists suggest  
Religion can actually help temper our violent nature.

When we embrace the authentic message of Jesus --> I believe that we can move toward a more loving and just society.

As Christians we recognize our human condition  
thirst for power  
desire for more  
tendency to focus on ourselves  
our natural propensity for violence

Christianity offers an alternative to that  
God has a different plan

(Matthew 5:9 NRSV)

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Jesus goes on and offers us this assessment of the world.

(Matthew 5:38-45 NRSV)

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'  
{39} But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; {40} and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; {41} and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. {42} Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. {43} "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' {44} But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, {45} so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Jesus offers a better path

Jesus offers a way to a more just and peaceful society → if we would only follow.

The key, of course, is forgiveness.

How do we get strength to forgive --> through the way of Jesus

There is a powerful book about a shooting that took place in 2006. It is called AMISH GRACE.

On Monday morning, October 2, 2006, a gunman entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. In front of twenty-five horrified pupils, thirty-two-year-old Charles Roberts ordered the boys and the teacher to leave. After tying the legs of the ten remaining girls, Roberts prepared to shoot them execution style with an automatic rifle and four hundred rounds of ammunition that he brought for the task. The oldest hostage, a thirteen-year-old, begged Roberts to "shoot me first and let the little ones go." Refusing her offer, he opened fire on all of them, killing five and leaving the others critically wounded. He then shot himself as police stormed the building. His motivation? "I'm angry at God for taking my little daughter," he told the children before the massacre.

By Tuesday morning some fifty television crews had clogged the small village of Nickel Mines, staying for five days until the killer and the killed were buried. The blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor when Amish parents brought words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children.

The outside world was incredulous that such forgiveness could be offered so quickly for such a heinous crime.

Fresh from the funerals where they had buried their own children, grieving Amish families accounted for half of the seventy-five people who attended the killer's burial. Roberts' widow was deeply moved by their presence as Amish families greeted her and her three children. The forgiveness went beyond talk and graveside presence: the Amish also supported a fund for the shooter's family.

How could they do that?

Because that is the way that Jesus taught them!

It is through religion -> through the way of Jesus for us as Christians that we can find peace and justice in this world.

Religion isn't the cause of violence → it is the antidote.