

Religion: Its Use and Abuse

Pentecost XVII

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 25:31-46

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

An area in my own life where there has been a great transformation of understanding has been in the area of religion. I began by worrying that religion might not be around long enough for me to fulfill my career. But then I realized that was just a narrow little idea of religion that I had within severe parochial limits. More and more, I came to see that religion was something that was endemic in the human person, that it is a universal human phenomenon, that it is simply that response that we make with our consciousness to the mystery of our existence, to the fragility of our existence, our vulnerability, the response that we make to the mystery that is our source and our ground. Religion deals with meaning and ultimate questions, and I became aware of the fact that it was a universal phenomena and that it would always be here as long as humans are humans.

As I came to realize that, I came to see that the respective religions were really human, imaginative constructs, a founding vision, a ritual and a cult that formed a community, and that the respective religions were really all fingers pointing beyond themselves to that ultimate mystery that is ineffable, incomprehensible, beyond our capacity to analyze or to define. It was a liberating moment for me when I could say my own religion is an authentic response to God or to the sacred or to the holy. For me, the window is Jesus and the way of Jesus is the way of life. But, a little over a year ago, that gracious and gentle scholarly presence of Huston Smith embodied in our midst that kind of breadth of understanding and experience that witnessed to the fact that all of the great religious traditions really were speaking of a presence of that which is holy and of that which is sacred, leading to a particular response of life.

In your insert, there is a citation from Huston Smith's book, *Beyond the Post-Modem Mind*, in which he speaks of sitting with the Dali Lama and Thomas Merton and a Native American and two or three others of other traditions, all of which he has entered, having experienced exactly the same thing, and then his comment, "How could God possibly (as once I thought, and I suppose as once he thought), how could God possibly have waited for thousands of years to reveal

God's self, leaving generation after generation in hopelessness and darkness, and finally to a little rivulet of humanity reveal the truth? Would that not," he says, "be contrary to the very nature of God, that nature of goodness and mercy that we believe constitutes God's nature?"

This is old hat for you, I know, but I am simply reminding you of the way that we have come. We come here to respect the respective religious traditions, and to realize that we also point beyond our particular structures and our particular confessional statements to that one who transcends all of our particular religions, which are simply the structures and the forms by which we give expression to that deep yearning within to be in touch with God, with the holy one, with that which is sacred.

As I have come to see the nature of religion more and more in its universality, I also have come to see its power, tremendous power. Religion is one of the most powerful forces on earth, and I began to realize that it was a power for good or for ill, that religion could be used or it could be abused. That is what I want to have you think with me for a few moments about this morning - the use and the abuse of that which is common to us here in a community of faith, our religion and religion in general.

Let me begin with the abuse of religion. I am doing this, of course, in light of the present circumstances and that which we have gone through so recently, where religion has played a part and has drawn forth all kinds of commentary from religious leaders. I want to say the first abuse of religion is the use of God as an agent of manipulation and control of people, an idea of God as a God in control who sits in the circle of the heavens and now and again intervenes, zapping this one or that one.

I mentioned last week my dismay at the insensitivity and inappropriateness of Jerry Falwell's comments about those who were partially responsible for our tragedy - Civil Libertarians, the feminists, gay and lesbian people, those who are pro-abortion, that God has judged America and that this attack is part of the judgment of God because of our moral decay. Oh, to be sure, in this past week he has apologized, recognizing the inappropriateness of it, but he did say that the secular press and media failed to understand his "theologically nuanced" statement. Well, it is his theologically nuanced statement which I would protest. It is that conception of a God that has died, if we think critically about it at all, that kind of a God is a God that is used by religious leaders and religious institutions to manipulate people, to threaten people, and to control people, because that is a God of control and those religious leaders who have been speaking out recently amaze me at the confidence with which they purport to know the mind of God and what God is doing.

If Falwell backed off, James Dobson of "Focus on the Family" did not. He said very clearly without retort, This is God's punishment on this nation for its moral decay, for taking God out of the schools, for forcing children to learn of

homosexuality, for sexual immorality in government," and so forth, on television. The punishment of this nation because of its moral decay. I want you to think for just a moment about what kind of a God that is. That is a God who sits up and contemplates the world and who looks at the United States of America and says, "You know, things have gone just about far enough. I think it's time to zap them." And so, the punishment of the nation because of moral decay. But, if you think about it a little further, couldn't God have targeted the victims a little better? I mean, if God is God, then why do the innocent suffer? If God is God, and all-powerful and manipulative and in control, then couldn't God aim the thunderbolts? Tell that story to the widows and the orphans and the parents who have lost children. Tell that story to those firemen who have lost their comrades. What kind of a God would that be? A capricious monster, if you think about it long enough and critically enough. That God in control, that God has got to go. That God has died, as a matter of fact.

In the National Cathedral service last week, there was dear Billy Graham. His presence there would have been enough, just to have been there. I don't know of anyone in the religious field who has achieved such fame and who has earned it with a greater dignity and humility than Billy Graham. I think the world of him. But, in his attempt to speak to this situation, didn't you feel for him? The stumbling and the confusion about how God in control can allow things like this to happen and yet, wanting to say, God is merciful and God is kind and God is good. You see, it just doesn't make sense. You just can't fit it together. Or, those who say there is evil in the world but that is because God created human freedom, but God will bring good out of evil. Well, if God can bring good out of evil, in other words, if God can call the final shot, then wouldn't it be merciful if God could call the shot a bit earlier? Then should we have to go through these tens of hundreds of thousands of years of human suffering and tragedy and darkness in order that eventually some good could come out of evil?

Now, it is time we simply call a spade a spade and recognize that that conception of God makes no reasonable sense, and you can claim mystery all you want to, but it is mystery fraught with tragedy and human horror, and really, it won't work, particularly if you are at the end of the suffering as its victim.

God in control? You can't have it both ways, friends. Either God has turned human history over to us and put it in our hands so that we possibly might be able to bring good out of evil, but not God "up there" contemplating what to do next. That mean, capricious, and small deity has no place in the Christian Church or community. It is an abuse of religion.

Falwell, Robertson, James Dobson - they are not alone. In an article yesterday in the *Grand Rapids Press*, the President of the Southern Baptist Church was reported to have said that this is Satan's handiwork and that this certainly shows once again that the only hope is to bring people to God through Jesus Christ alone. What has that got to do with it, I wonder? And if, somehow, finally we are

all encouraged to bring our neighbors to the knowledge of the son of God, what has that got to do with it, really? Don't we know that that conception of God creates such horrible problems that we ought, rather, to be ashamed of speaking about that kind of God in control. That is a petty and capricious deity that will no longer work for us who have some knowledge of our world, some understanding of the development of human history, some sense of the nature of the human being in human society. We don't have to call in a savior nor God. This is a *human* problem; it is *our* problem, and to use God that way is an abuse of religion. As a corollary to that, to use God to fuel, to use religion to fuel human passion leading to violence, is an abuse of religion.

I made the mistake of walking into the bedroom last night while Nancy was watching *A & E Biography*, bin Laden's story. Perhaps you saw it. A fascinating tale of one who in the varied life experiences finally came to a deep religious commitment which has now spawned all kinds of violence, wanting to drive out the West from those holy lands of Islam, and being the agent to recruit and to propel so many who have nothing to lose into this kind of violent action whose reward is heaven.

But, it is not a problem of Islam, for if we go to Orthodox Judaism, there are Rabbis in Jerusalem that were teaching such that a young man one day took a gun to Prime Minister Rabin and there was a Jewish settler who entered the mosque in Hebron and opened fire on Muslims at prayer. And don't we really know, don't Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson know that, while they would separate themselves from violence and they would abhor violence, don't they know that when a religious leader uses a certain rhetoric and a certain tone with a certain passion, that those who receive it uncritically will be fueled into violence?

Don't we know that, within our own Protestant Christian Right, there have been those who have been propelled into killing abortion clinic doctors and bombing Planned Parenthood units, and terrible hate crimes? Matthew Shepherd's name comes to mind. Don't we realize, dear friends, that religion is thereby abused when a manipulative and mean God who controls is used to fuel the passions of those who in turn are driven to violence that create the hell on earth that we have experienced so recently? It is an abuse of religion and it is time the word is spoken and that the issue is joined.

If that is its abuse, then what is its use?

Let me say maybe radically, maybe to your surprise, maybe to your objection, let me say that religion is not to make us right. It is to make us good. Religion is not to make us right. It is to make us good.

Read Karen Armstrong's comments in your insert this afternoon where she speaks about *mythos* and *logos*, for in her study of fundamentalism, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, she comes back again and again to the fact that what the

fundamentalists do is to make religion a matter of *logos* rather than *mythos*. To make it a matter of *logos* is to make it literally true, historically true in every detail, and in its confessional statements and its dogmas to be literally true, to use human reason and intelligence, to structure an image of God, a conception of God, a conception of religious faith, and to demand that that is true and there is no other truth, that is *logos*. *Logos* is our human reason, it is our intelligence. It is what we use if we want to know about the possibility of stem cells. It is what we use if we want to know about the treatment of disease or a heart transplant. It is what we use if we want to know how best to grow our crops on the agricultural scene. Our human *logos* is how we fly airplanes and study the stars. The *logos* is how we live. It is the empirical method of investigation.

Logos is wonderful; it is a great human gift, but logos is not the source or the determinant of religion. Religions are not in that sense true or false. They are *mythos*. They have to do with stories that convey meaning, that speak about the values and the meaning of life. Religion is not true or false. Is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony true? Are Van Gogh's Sunflowers true? Is Michelangelo's David true? Of course not. But, as human beings with consciousness and intuitive sense and esthetic appreciation, we stand there and know we are in the presence of greatness; it is not a matter of whether it is true or false. That is the wrong question. It is whether or not there is value communicated. And so, our religious experience is not that which is a consequence of rational investigation and the building of dogmas and doctrines and structures. It is the *experience*, the intuitive sense of that sacredness and that holiness that now and again, here and there, overwhelms us.

When we love one another, when there is a creative interchange between human beings, there God is. John says God is love and the one who dwells in love dwells in God and God dwells in that one. Where there is eye-to-eye contact and understanding, where soul meets soul, or when one stands in wonder before the starry heavens or the magnificence of a sunset, where one sees a child, where one hugs a lover, there God is.

Religion is not to make us right. I could really get excited and a bit upset about all of the division and all of the exclusion, all of those truth claims and those condemnations of other visions and understandings: what a silly thing it is and what a costly thing it is, and how wrong it is. It has nothing to do with good religion which is to speak to us of meaning, of beauty, of wonder and of love, and that's why we need this community. That is why we need each other. That is why we need to keep hugging each other and supporting each other and being kind, one to another.

Isaiah said, "All you religious, you're so religious, I can't stand you. But God says that's not the fast I want. Be kind. Be compassionate. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give shelter to the homeless." And Jesus who said it's as simple as doing good to the one who crosses your path. That is the use of religion. That is the

purpose of the faith community, to motivate us, inspire us, and move us to be good, to be good for God's sake, and to find comfort that there is, at the core of things, that which is meaningful and good.

Henry Nelson Wieman, a great theologian of a former generation, speaking about the idea of God, told the story of his little daughter. When she was little and she would fall down and skin her knee, he would pick her up in his arms. She'd be crying away, and he'd say, "Well, well, well." And he did it time after time, comforting her, soothing her. One day she fell down and skinned her knee and she was crying and he picked her up, but he didn't say anything. She stopped crying immediately and said, "Say, 'Well, well, well.'"

Did you feel it? Isn't that what it is? Isn't it that kind of emotional undergirding, isn't it that deep, deep assurance when the bottom falls out and the roof caves in, that there still is that sacred and the holy that comes through to us as to a little child, comforting, "Well, well, well." That is why we say, "All will be well, all will be well, all manner of things will be well." Not in the denial of the darkness, but in the face of the sacred that is love experienced as we love one another.

References:

Karen Armstrong. *A History of God*. The Random House Publishing Group, 1993.