

The Religious War: Where the Battle Rages

Pentecost XXI

Scripture: Luke 19:45-20:8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

A Reading From the Present: *The God of a Diverse People*, Alan Wolfe:

The war now going on between Americans and forces of Osama bin Laden is not between belief and non-belief. It is, instead, about two different ways of believing, only one of which allows for individual conscience and freedom. The refusal of the other to make that allowance is what makes terrorism against non-believers possible.

We live in interesting times, to say the least, and the situation facing our world, human society, is complex, indeed. You can analyze it from a variety of angles. There are so many factors that play into the situation through which we are now living as a human family, and I certainly am not competent to analyze all of those or pull them apart and disentangle them. Economic factors, Middle East oil, the Gulf War, support for Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli-Arab conflict in the larger context, Cold War carryovers, political ideology, and of course, the religious factor. You can turn on your television any hour of the day and find talking heads trying to decipher what is going on from one angle or another, and you didn't come here this morning to hear my less than competent discussion about all of that, but there is one thing that I think as a faith community we must be clear about - it is that religious factor, because I do believe there is a religious war going on.

Martin Luther said that you can be engaged with a whole lot of things across the whole spectrum of the Christian faith that you profess, but if you're not dealing with that issue where the battle rages, you are not being faithful to Christ. It seems to me in this present situation, the one thing that should be clarified is the nature of religion, its function, and how it holds the potential for the demonic, and that also, in the present situation with the vulnerability to which we are all exposed at this point, it is religion that can bring healing and meaning and some comfort.

There are two kinds of religion and there is a religious war going on. That is what I want to seek to clarify or to address this morning - that religious war, two kinds of belief, two kinds of religious commitment.

The one is the traditional, the traditional kind of religious experience that is the consequence of a sacred text and a sacred tradition and an institution, a community of people gathered around a certain set of beliefs, a certain set of practices, a certain set of requirements. This has been religion traditionally: some founding vision, some story taking shape, gathering a community, building a tradition. And religion is a very powerful force. The reason that it is a part of the situation of our world today is not that the issue is whether the world is going to become Islamic or Christian or Jewish. It is not a battle of the religions. But, it is a religious war about two kinds of religion.

The respective religions are all vulnerable to either kind of religious faith and experience. The traditional is most common; it is what we take for granted. It is an institution, a community, it is a set of beliefs, and that which marks the one kind of religion is an authoritarianism that claims absolute truth and demands absolute obedience to its moral dictates and defines a way of life. That authoritarian aspect of religion is what has marked religion for the most part, because in religion we are dealing with ultimate questions. We're dealing with deep existential issues. We're wondering about the meaning of life. We ask questions about God, the immortality of the soul, the possibility of eternal life. We ask the deep philosophical questions - "Why is there something rather than nothing," and all of these questions which are the deepest questions, which are part and parcel of being human in those moments of deep reflection, and those moments when we are confronted with the mystery of life, and those moments when we receive the terminal diagnosis or a loved one is taken from us, or some crisis in the midst of our day disrupts the whole plan of our life.

In moments like that, we inevitably ask these questions of the meaning, and there is no answer. There is no verifiable answer. There is no answer that can come at the end of a mathematical formula or no answer that can be mixed together in a chemistry lab. We deal with those ultimate mysteries, and to be human means to be in history and it means to live without absolutes, to live without answers.

Now, twenty or twenty-five years ago, if I had heard a preacher say that, I probably would have gotten up and walked out. Just hold your seats. I'll try to be honest with you this morning. The things that you and I deal with together, the whole religious thing, deals with questions for which there are not verifiable answers. We simply don't know. The best we can do is follow our intuitions, probe our insights. But, you see, for the mass of humankind, that is an exercise too difficult, too trying, too heavy, and so what religion has been historically has been a vision that has made sense, that has resonated in the minds and hearts of people. A story has been written, the tradition has been formed, the community forms an institution that finally refines and defines itself with carefully crafted

creeds and confessional statements, a clear word about moral and ethical issues, and, to the extent that the institution becomes powerful, the demand for submission to the intellectual statement and obedience to the moral way. Religion has been marked by authoritarianism. It is understandable because we deal with issues for which it is impossible to have clearly defined, verifiable answers.

Now, we're in the stream of history. We move in the river of history. And we simply can't get out of the river and get up and survey the whole thing. There are people who have claimed precisely that. While they may not have claimed that they get out of the river, they have claimed that God has illumined them to the extent that what they have seen, what they understand becomes for them the word of God, and that word of God, to the extent that it can find resonance in others, becomes the founding vision, and then you have a religion. You have a story, a text, a tradition, and so forth. But, it is an authoritarian system because it is based on unverifiable claims. You believe it? Good. You don't believe it? Well, I may be able to write you out of the community, but I can't force you to believe it. You see it? Wonderful. You don't see it? You may be dull or obstinate or just a bit slow, but I can't do anything about that.

This is the nature of religion and religious community. It has that authoritarian aspect, and it lives by people adhering to this vision, endorsing this vision, buying this vision, supporting this vision, believing its creeds, practicing its way of life.

It's not all bad. In fact, it has been pretty good most of the time, for it has given people a sense of orientation. It has given them a vision by which to live, it has given them a map, and all of that. So, there's a positive aspect to that. But, I want you to see that it is based on an authoritarian claim and that goes for about 95% or maybe it is 98 and 44/100% of religion. Some religious groups push it hard, and some are soft around the edges. But finally, even those who are soft around the edges, if you say, "On what basis do you have this community, on what basis do you gather, on what basis will you preach?" They will say, "Well, we have this word from the Lord." And no matter how far the critical rationality has entered into the tradition, nonetheless, whether it be the Catholic Church with its infallible teaching office, or whether it be the Protestant Church with its infallible Bible, even an infallible Bible that has been examined critically, nonetheless, finally, still has an authoritarian claim, pushed either with great energy or rather apologetically. Do you see that? One kind of religion. That's one kind of religion. And it covers a huge spectrum of religion, but it finally makes its claim on having a word from God which is absolute.

Now, there's another kind of religion. It's almost non-existent. It probably exists in those who are no longer a part of the church, in what Bishop Spong would call "The Church Alumni Association." It is a religious faith and experience that is grounded in one's own personal vision and personal conviction.

It is, as I said a couple of weeks ago, not that one starts out with a blank slate. Of course, one is already, from the womb, shaped and nurtured. Nonetheless, this other kind of religion is not a tribute to a text, to a tradition, to an institution, an ultimate kind of authority. It is an authority that will be received conditionally, critically, on the basis of one's own struggle and wrestling with the issues and the questions in order to come to a place to stand which may very well be within a community, but a community that allows for diversity of opinion, a community that has no party line, a community that encourages conversation and discussion. That is a different kind of religion and it is almost non-existent in our world in terms of any institutional manifestation.

Now, you might say to me, "Richard Rhem, you are an arrogant..., for you are calling in question the absolute authority of the Bible which is your storybook, the Christian Church and its tradition which is your people, your community. You are arrogant in that you are saying you will not believe what you cannot inwardly affirm in your own mind and heart, what you cannot be passionately engaged with," and I'll have to plead guilty. And I want to say it just that bluntly so that you don't miss it, because if there's one thing the pulpit is very good at, it is fudging so that everybody goes out thinking they heard what they wanted to hear.

Well, you probably won't really want to hear what I am saying today because I am saying to you there is no authoritarian claim on you that should be greater than your own inward conviction, your own intellectual commitment, your own passionate involvement, that which has gone through the filters of your mind and your heart, giving you a place to stay. You may say, "Well, the Church has been around for two thousand years and what you are saying makes institutional existence questionable. Don't you worry about that?"

Yes and no. It is true that what I am saying does not make for strong, vibrant institutions. But, what I am suggesting is not without precedent. Have you ever heard of Jesus? Have you ever heard of Jesus who came to Jerusalem and started overturning the furniture of the temple? Think about it now. The temple is the symbolic, geographical, concrete center of the Jewish nation. The temple with its sacrificial system, with its priesthood, with its worship - all of that, the very heart and center of the Jewish nation, and Jesus took it on. Jesus took it on because Jesus was convinced in his context and history, where he saw imperial Rome occupying a land in which the people were being driven off their land, driven into hopelessness, despair and poverty, saw the collaboration of the whole temple system, saw the temple system as putting everybody in its place, saw the temple system as having become so institutionally honed that it had lost its heart and soul and was disconnected from the actual human experience of the people for whom the temple was to exist. And Jesus took it on. Jesus had the audacity, Jesus had the arrogance to say, "This which is the very heart and center of this nation is wrong!"

And his action was a prophetic action that spoke about the destruction of the very center of that nation. Thereby he was in good standing with the prophet Jeremiah, who said, "Say not the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." Or, Isaiah, who said "You've made this temple of mine, this house which is to be a house of prayer for all people, into a den of thieves." But, Jesus, in his prophetic action was actually speaking about the destruction of that which was the center of the religious life of his people.

Now, you can say, "Well, of course, he was the son of God. Who are you? The son of Effie." And if you want to get away with it that way, if you want to say, "Well, Jesus could do that, but you can't do that, Dick Rhem," go ahead. But I want to suggest to you that the watershed of history which was fomented by Jesus was no more serious than the watershed through which we are walking, and what has happened is that traditionally conceived religious establishment has to be exposed for what it is, and its potential for the demonic, because finally, once again, one has to make one's choice. There is a great gulf fixed between those two kinds of religion, those two kinds of faith.

Now, if you'd been on the Board of Trustees of the temple, what would you have done? You are a responsible person, you love the tradition, you love your neighbor, you love your people, you love the temple, you love the priesthood, you love the smell of incense, and now this itinerant preacher, this prophet comes to town and throws all the furniture around, what are you going to do? You're going to call a meeting, of course. And you're going to begin to strategize because you are good people, reasonable people, respectable people, you have risen to the top of your community. You're a member of the Sanhedrin, perhaps, or a member of the priesthood, or whatever, and you begin to say, "What are we going to do?" Because what this man has said, what this man has done undercuts the possibility of a future for this institution as it is, and so you begin to figure the inevitable.

What they were doing was not wrong. They had scripture for every practice of the temple that Jesus challenged. They had long, historical tradition for all of the practices that were still taking place. They were the authentic embodiment of that whole Hebrew faith and, being responsible people, they had to figure out how to react. So, what is the question? Well, the question is the question we have been talking about this morning. They came to Jesus and said, "By what authority do you do this?"

They knew they were in trouble. The people were hanging on his words. You see, the people outside the institution always know first, because it makes sense to them. People out there all over the world outside of the churches know that the institution's claim of authority is only as strong as it is compelling to those who hear its message; there is no possibility to verify what is claimed.

And so, they will put Jesus on the spot - by what authority do you call in question the very heart and center of our tradition?

Responding with a question of his own, Jesus asks them about John the Baptist, a recent prophet who also ruffled official feathers, "Was John's authority from heaven or from men?"

Now the temple authorities were on the spot because if they answered that John's preaching was from God, Jesus would counter, "Then why did you not believe him?" But, if they accorded him only human authority, the people would stone them because in the eyes of the people, John was a prophet from God. They are stuck; they cannot answer without betraying themselves. They simply decline to answer.

And Jesus declines to answer, as well.

Why do you think he was not going to tell them? Was he playing a little cat and mouse game? Was this just one-upmanship? I don't think so. I think Jesus was simply saying, "Look, this is a matter of authority and you either see it or you don't. You want to know my authority? You either feel it or you don't. Do you think I want to say this has nothing to do with God? You're crazy. Obviously, this is the word of God. This is the word of God filtered through me. My whole life is hinged on this vision, this passionate commitment. But, can I verify that? Can I prove that? Of course, I can't. Either you see it or you don't. Either you understand it or you don't. Either the Spirit of God causes lights to go on and bells to ring, or you can just sit there and stew and get angry, and there's not a thing I can do about it."

You see, there are two kinds of religion, and I hope this present moment of history will help us to see that, for all the potential good that religion traditionally conceived has done, it also has that awful potential for the demonic, for someone with charisma to say, "God said," and pound the book, point to the tradition, show the temple in all its glory and cause people en masse to come mindlessly on to execute the wrath of God according to me. That's been the story. It is the story, and the only religion that has the possibility of giving a human future is that weak religion which is the word of God according to me, and you, and you, and us together as we wrestle together, struggle together, think together, open our hearts and minds together, and move together into a humane future.

There's a religious war going on, friends and, if you would believe what I said today and join me, you would be in an extreme minority position, but then, just think what a pinch of salt or a bit of yeast can do.