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The National Presbyterian Church

Probing Questions: “Is Religion Inherently Dangerous?”

Matthew 23:1-3, 13-15; Deuteronomy 20:10-16; John 13:35

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In our sermons at the beginning of this new year, we’ve been looking at issues in 2015 that continue to mark our lives in 2016. *Issues like* race, and violence, and sexuality and the environment.

Today, we look at “Religion” itself. And the question that I want us to think about is this one: *Is Religion Inherently Dangerous?*

The presenting issue in 2015, of course, giving rise to our question

was *the violence caused in the name of Islam* primarily by the Islamic State – but by others as well -- whether in Iraq or Syria, or in the bombings in the city of Paris.

But of course it goes beyond that . . .

- Go back to 2004 and 2005, and you have bombings by *Islamic militants* in Spain and London.
- and then before that, of course, *in 2001* you have 9/11, and the loss of almost 3000 lives in New York City as the Twin Towers come crashing down!

But you can’t stop there either:

- Back in the ’90’s you’ve got *Muslims and Christians* slugging it out in the Balkans
- and in the ’70s and ’80’s, *Protestants and Catholics* are doing the same in N. Ireland

And then -- the eastern religions are not immune from this either . . .

- in India it’s not just the Muslims leading the way, but it’s also been *Hindu nationalists* who have become just as violent against Muslims!
- and in Burma and Sri Lanka this past year, even groups of *Buddhist monks* – *who you’d think wouldn’t hurt a flea* -- who have turned violent against some others -- who are not of their religion or race.

And that doesn’t even touch the horrific issues of

- *sexual abuse* in churches, and
 - *the history of violent and vicious racism*, carried out in God’s name both in our own nation and elsewhere: think Ireland, or Boston, or South Africa or the South.

And then too, you go further back in history, and you find

- *internal battles within Christianity itself* which are far from attractive:
 - so in the 16th century, you have the Catholic Inquisition beating up on anyone deemed to be a heretic,
 - with the protestant John Calvin joining the fray with his blessing of the death of Spanish physician, Michael Servetus, deemed also to be a heretic, as a Unitarian.
- *And then there’s anti-Semitism* in Islam and Christianity – resurfacing repeatedly over the centuries and justified by some Christians with the accusation that “the Jews killed Jesus.”
[well, some Jews – the Sadducees, for example --certainly helped the cause. *But the truth is* that it was, in fact, the Romans who did the deed].

But either way -- all of this is indescribably awful,

and the words of one journalist -- Muriel Gray -- writing in the United Kingdom in response to the 2005 London bombing, surely express the thoughts of many people when she boldly declares that . . .

"It has never been clearer. There has only been one place to lay the blame, and it has ever-been-thus. The cause of all this misery, mayhem, violence, terror and ignorance is, of course, religion itself" [which is nothing other than] "nonsense" from the "Dark Ages -- a ridiculous anachronism, which education, wisdom and experience can hopefully overcome in time."

(Glasgow Herald, July 24, 2005)

And reductionist views such as this have been made enormously popular around the world through best-selling books by people like Oxford scientist, Richard Dawkins, and the brilliant pundit, the late Christopher Hitchens, who agree that it's not just *bad religion* that's bad

- **but *all religion* that's bad!**
- ***religion itself* is the problem**
- ***religion itself* is a source of evil that is inherently dangerous!!**

So, not surprisingly, even though *the title* of Hitchens' 2007 best-selling book is provocative enough: "**god Is Not Great**", *the sub-title* is even more provocative: "**How Religion Poisons Everything**".

And the sad fact is (as I've already noted) that there's a lot of evidence (repeated endlessly in the media) that points in this direction . . .

Which leaves us asking as believers and Christians, about how we can respond when it comes to the link between religion and danger?

What are we to do? What are we to say? and, How are we to say it?

To which I'd say --

- that the place to start first is *with a little dose* of humility
- And then, we need to add a little fact-checking,
- And then, third, we need to focus on our own witness and actions
and not that of others.

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So . . . Let's start with a dose of Humility and admit that truly awful things have been done in the name of God,

- Not just by people of *other* religions,
- But by us Christians as well.

Jesus pointed out in the passage in Matthew 23 that we read a few moments ago, for example, that the danger of religious hypocrisy, the danger of bad religion for his followers, was real.

He wasn't naïve. He knew that all his followers were seriously flawed -- and that we'd all be wrestling with sins of pride and arrogance, and weakness, and the need to be one up on others: all those sins that lead to the breakdown of relationships and then to conflict.

To be sure he was pointing first at the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day -- who were not his followers. **But the message was intended for all of us too:** to warn us that that none of us is immune from doing awful things, even with the best of intentions.

Which is one reason we confess our sins as we begin worship Sunday by Sunday. It's like clearing the air, and telling the truth about ourselves, reminding ourselves not to be self-righteous -- that only Jesus is perfect -- and we are not.

So, we've all blown it, and we're going to do it again, and sometimes in our lives, and in history, we Christians blow it big time!

And I see no reason to deny this. In fact Jesus himself would surely want this kind of humility to be built into the core of our faith.

Nor do we need to deny that the Book God has given us -- the Bible -- is complicated, and that at times it can be used to justify terrible actions in the name of God, because it has within it stories and actions that are sometimes brutal and hard to understand.

So I read a few moments ago from the Book of Deuteronomy about God's people being commanded to put whole communities of people to death:

*And this looks awfully like the world of ISIS
coming back to real-life, in our own day and age! . . .*

And while, if you give me time, I may be able to explain these difficult passages, and interpret them within the context of their age, there's no question that even if I succeed in satisfying some, others will still roll their eyes and say that it makes no sense; and still others will still come along and use those passages for evil. They are there, and they are open to abuse!!

And what is true in our religion is true of all religions that have any claim on the truth: they all can become ugly and even dangerous

SO, . . . YES! RELIGION IS INHERENTLY DANGEROUS . . .

But -- having said that, what seems to be conveniently forgotten in most discussions of this sort, is that all kinds of human activities and ideologies and inventions are also inherently dangerous!

Lots of things in the world are in precisely the same boat!! But rarely do people take the next step -- as so many do with religion -- and declare that therefore they should be wiped out of existence.

So let me give you an example of this double standard.

Think, for example, about the great invention that we call the airplane,

and ask the same question of the airplane that we do of religion: **"Are airplanes inherently dangerous?"**

To which of course, the answer is "Absolutely! Clearly! Yes!!"

But then, immediately, we say to ourselves, what kind of a question is that? I mean . . . we all know that that's not their purpose -- to be dangerous! Planes don't *set out to be* dangerous, even if they end up that way. In fact, *they set out to be* wonderful and beautiful and to be remarkable instruments for good.

- shrinking the world
- bringing families, and nations together
- making travel faster over great distances, (*unless we get stuck in security or in a storm!*)
- bringing online purchases miraculously to our doors within a few hours of the transaction!

So, there's no question that for the most part, most of our lives have been made better by the advent of the "plane" . . . ***even though sometimes planes go wrong, and dangerously so:*** they crash and, when they do, large numbers of people die horrible deaths.

- **Sometimes** this is because of internal flaws of wear and tear that nobody noticed or paid attention to: human error!
- **and sometimes** it's because of pilot error. Maybe the pilot has unresolved medical or mental issues (as in last year's crash of a German plane in the Alps).
- **and in some cases** the peaceful use of planes can be taken over for some other purpose:
 - Maybe the plane and the pilot are in the military, and they use the plane to drop bombs or shoot other planes out of the sky.
 - Or, yes, maybe the pilot is motivated by religion, and has the demonic idea to turn the plane itself into an instrument of death -- a missile.

So, planes can be used and misused. Planes can be used not only to do great good but to destroy life.

In fact, it only took 6 years after the first successful flight by the Wright brothers for someone to see that planes could become militarized for use in war – which, in World War I, they were.

And what's our reaction to this? What's our reaction to the fact that planes are *inherently dangerous*, and have caused the death of millions?

- Do we condemn the airplane to extinction?
- Do we condemn the technology that led to their creation?
- Is the science of jet propulsion, or the Bernoulli principle of lift, to blame?
- Do we seek to ban airplanes? Or ban science?
- Do we launch a propaganda war against airplanes because we now know that they are the cause of all this misery, mayhem, violence, terror and ignorance?

To which we answer . . . **“Of course not!! No!”**

Instead, **what we do is** . . .

- Admit the truth: that anything that flies, anything that is handled by fallible human beings, is both dangerous and wonderful at the same time.
- And then, what we do is to seek, rigorously, to diminish any dangers by using problems and failures to make planes safer and safer. (*When there's an accident, we look for the black box*).
- And then, unabashedly and not defensively, we remind people of the incredible overall safety record of flight.
- **And then – and this is the critical point – we make a decision to live with the tension between safety and blessing and the possibility of deadly danger every time we fly.**

But when it comes to religion, the rules seem to be different

We look at the danger, which is real, and dismiss the intended purposes and possibilities and forget in one fell swoop all the goodness

that has been accomplished in the name of Christ for 2000 years

the **hungry** fed, the **sick** healed, the **ignorant** taught, colleges established, the **powerful** restrained, **beauty and art** inspired.

And, as if that's not enough, we forget that *science itself began to flourish in Europe precisely because of the belief that the universe was rational and could be explored because it had been created by a rational creator!*

And then, too, we forget so easily another fact: that when the world has tried to get rid of religion in the past (this is nothing new), and when we've tried to replace it with ideologies that are secular – those secular ideologies have led to evils and terrors that dwarf all the dangers and evil of religion combined.

Nothing in all of history, for example, compares with the deadly fruit of the 20th century ideologies of communism or fascism, or even of nationalism when it becomes godless.

- In World War II, (according to the National WWII museum website), there were **between 60 and 80 million deaths** – only a quarter in battle, and the rest civilian. We might not realize this, because there were less than half a million US deaths, but
 - In the Soviet Union, over 20 million died
 - In China the same: over 20 million died

Nothing in the-history-of-the-world compares with this slaughter caused by nationalism and fascism.

And then you add to that the 6 million deaths in the Holocaust, before moving on to communism.

- With 6-7 million deaths caused by Stalin in Ukraine
- And between 1 and 3 million deaths caused by MaoTseTung in China's cultural revolution
- and 2 million deaths caused by Pol Pot in the killing fields of Cambodia

So, the picture for secularism in 20th century is bleak indeed. Leaving Jonathan Sachs, the retired Head Rabbi of Great Britain, to conclude that

***‘every attempt to find a substitute for religion
has resulted in even more violence.’***

(Not in God’s Name, 2015, p.101)

A conclusion, which, of course, doesn’t leave religion off the hook.

But what it does do, at least – or I hope it should do – is to give us enough confidence **not to be** brow beaten into submission by the constant and pervasive attacks on religion that seem so compelling and rational!

-- sure we’ve messed up! (we need humility)

-- Sure we’re “flawed-followers-of-God” (eat some humble pie)

-- **sure religion is inherently dangerous . . .**

But let’s do some fact-checking . . . so too is pretty much everything else we cherish including airplanes and flight, and the great god of science and technology itself which stands behind them!

But back to religion. Declaring our flaws, or simply checking the facts, is no place to end, but just a place to begin . . .

That is, in the face of the secular indictment of religion, our goal should not only be to survive but to thrive and to do whatever we can to turn things around; to show that faith in God can change things for good and for many.

In fact, Jesus reminded his followers not only of their own weakness, and the dangers of hypocrisy, but of the fact that it wouldn’t only be by argument and reason that people would come to believe in him I (indeed it’s rarely by argument and reason!), but far more because of the witness of the changed lives of his followers: individually and as a church. Changed not by our own power alone, of course, but by our dependence on the power of God’s Spirit, to help us:

- Love your enemy, says Jesus . . And if you can’t do that,
- Love your neighbors, whoever they are . . And if you can’t do that,
- Love one another, those closest to you; those in your church,
- begin somewhere . . .

And if you do that . . people will see it, and the anti-religion rhetoric will begin to lose its power, and, says Jesus (John 13:35), no matter what the spirit of the age, *by this people will come **know** that you are my disciples* – that there’s more to life than meets the eye.

And perhaps some, by the grace of God, will even want to transfer onto our team!

Jonathan Sachs, Not In God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence, 2015.

Keith Ward, Is Religion Dangerous? 2006.

Christopher Hitchens, god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything, 2007.

Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, 2006

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