

## **What do we do when religion turns Evil?**

Sermon for 11/13, 2005 by the Reverend Lone Jensen

What do we do indeed? Hopefully not what the three little monkeys are doing on the front of our order of service today. See no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil only leaves evil unopposed and implies consent. That is the apathy, fear or indifference that led to Hitler's Germany in one of the most civilized nations in Europe. Remember my friends: manners do matter but do you really care if your killer knows what fork to use or addresses his victims in the proper manner? Sir, would you please stand still so I can shoot you?

Many years ago as I was getting ready to go to seminary I saved money by taking a teaching job in a very rural area of Northern Louisiana. This was religiously a heavily Southern Baptist, Pentecostal area with no drinking, no dancing and definitely no life and fun loving Cajuns around. I taught art K-12 in two rural schools. My students were, to put it mildly, culturally isolated and most of them lived in fear of the devil. Once they trusted me they began to tell me about their Sunday experiences. They described the devil as they believed they saw him appear "just last Sunday" in the pews with scales, horns, pitchfork and all. They spoke of how you must always be on guard for he can be hiding in soap, in books, in music and try to tempt you into everlasting burning hell. I felt as if I had landed in another century, back in medieval times. The children were so fearful, physically beaten as a matter of course and it was

useless to report that as child abuse since just about everyone did it, even in the school. They quoted the Bible to justify this. We had many public school prayers heavy on Jesus and Salvation. One of my High School students tried to commit suicide; he was gay and had been sent to a so-called Christian re-programmer. A young girl told me how her stepfather beat her daily with a belt. I reported it but nothing was done.

Now most people there were really good and decent people and they loved their families but what they were taught and told by their religion made them do what to my mind were evil things. First graders should not live in fear for their souls. No child should be told that they were damned. No high school boy should want to commit suicide simply for being who he was. Religion can indeed be a force for evil. The list is long and added to almost daily.

Charles Kimball writes: *"The dangers posed by people and groups inspired by or operating under the guise of religion have never been clearer. The evidence is readily available in the headlines of our daily newspapers "Hindus and Muslims on the Brink of War in Kashmir"; Serbian Christians Stand Trial for Atrocities Against Bosnian Muslims "Palestinians Killed by Jewish Settlers in the Occupied Territories "Muslim Militant Kills Twenty with Suicide Bomb at Jerusalem Pizza Parlor"; "Murder Trial Begins for Fundamentalist Christian Minister in Abortion Doctor Case:"* And since he wrote this how many more atrocities have been done in the

name of God? We can add the Amman wedding party last week destroyed by suicide bomber and the list will go on and sadly on. Until sanity breaks out all over!

So is the solution to “get over these ancient superstitions” as some call religion in general? Edward Harris recently made a strong case for that in his book entitled *The End of Faith*. Well it has been tried before as it was in the old Soviet Union and religion still happened but in disguise. Surely a mummified Lenin in a glass case and contemporary extreme leader worship in North Korea had and have all the trappings of a religious cult. And for every evil act done in the name of religion we can find an equal number of kind, compassionate and heroic self sacrificing acts. Getting rid of religion will only make it go underground.

In his book *Holy War Holy Peace. How religion can bring peace to the Middle East* Marc Gopin cites many such examples. He also offers many prescriptions for effective peace making. He tells us about parents of young Israeli and Palestinian children killed in the conflict who speak of their pain, who work out of their tragedy for the good, that no more children may die. This is religion when it embodies hope, a religion that nurtures understanding and compassion.

One thing we can do is make sure such examples of good religion, such efforts at compassion get at least as much coverage as the death cults with their seemingly inexhaustible army of young

suicide bombers. For this we can use our voices and influence. The problem is that violence sells, violence and evil sells even more and though I do not believe in the devil, I do know that evil and its power can be very seductive. We got to make good equally attractive. In this society I suppose the metaphor has to be: we got to make good: sexy!

We know in our hearts that we must speak up and act against religions that are destructive. But first we must see and hear clearly what makes a religion: evil, strong as that statement is. We must intentionally take the fingers out of our ears and uncover our eyes. To each of us I suppose the definition of what makes a religion evil differs somewhat. That is both our strength and our weakness as Unitarian Universalists.

Any religion, even a peace loving one can turn evil. Crusaders killed brutally in the name of the prince of peace and heretics were burned at the stake by followers of a Jesus who said we should forgive our enemies and refused to stone a woman sentenced to death *“Scholars of new religious movements in Japan have focused considerable attention on Aum Shinrikyo since the chemical weapons were unleashed in the subway stations. The picture that emerged paralleled that of many other religious sects or cults. Aum Shinrikyo began in 1986 with a charismatic leader.*

*His eclectic teachings drew from the deep well of established religious traditions: Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. In the beginning, Asahara's teachings spoke to both the hearts and minds of*

*his idealistic young followers. But less than a decade later, Asahara demanded unquestioning devotion to his destructive and apocalyptic vision. Those who were living in the Aum communities no longer needed to think for themselves. This is a pivotal point at which religion often becomes evil. Authentic religion engages the intellect as people wrestle with the mystery of existence and the challenges of living in an imperfect world. Conversely, blind obedience is a sure sign of corrupt religion. Beware of any religious movement that seeks to limit the intellectual freedom and individual integrity of its adherents. “(Kimball)*

Kimball gives us these five danger signs that can develop in any religion. In addition to blind obedience he cites four more: Absolute truth claims, establishing the ideal time, the end justifies any means and declaring holy war.

Absolute truth claims are as common as dandelions in the East and sagebrush around here. We hardly need to work at finding them. Tune in to almost any popular Christian broadcast and really listen. It can get very scary out there. *Answers to all one's personal, financial, and physical problems are neatly packaged and readily available. It is highly probable that a rigid theology of exclusivism will be woven into the rhetoric of whatever program you happen to tune in.*

*Different religions and virtually every conceivable form of evil and suffering will be linked simplistically with satanic forces. (Kimball)*

Pat Robertson is a prime example. Apparently anyone who disagrees with him also disagrees with God. He is so obvious as to be funny if

only he did not have so many followers. Yesterday he had it in for the good and responsible citizens of the city of Dover, who voted out a school board that had instituted an intelligent design curriculum. God he said would surely punish the town by calling down untold disasters upon it. How easy it must be when you believe you know Gods' mind.

Another danger sign: Establishing the ideal time. This could also be called longing for the impossible. Take the dream of a so called Islamic State. Sure Islam once reigned over much of the civilized world. But it was a time of cultural flowering, of scientific advances and not a distorted Taliban nightmare where music and art were forbidden. It was in fact the influx of so many diverse cultures that gave this world its rich beauty and its advanced knowledge. I suspect if any of the admirers of these early times could actually travel backward in time they would be deeply disappointed at finding after all just another imperfect human society. Try as they may, fanatics can only keep on eliminating the other the imperfect ones but never fully eliminate the imperfection or impurity within them selves. That is why such societies often turn evil. It is an impossible goal.

The next danger signal is when any means are justified because of the noble end. That is a moral license to kill people to show people that killing is wrong. Bombing clinics to stop abortion is one such example. The means do in fact matter greatly! Heretics were burned to save their souls, witches tortured to confess and oh, do I have to go on about the obvious, torture is always wrong. And such tactics

gives false information anyhow. Enough pain and you will confess anything, true or not.

Declaring holy war, now there is very current religious evil, but not one that any particular religion has a monopoly on. Right now the media images are of Islamic martyrs who seemingly will do anything to destroy the enemy and bring themselves into paradise. But is that a true picture? How many billion Muslims are there and how many suicide bombers? Yes, that particular interpretation of Islam is evil, no doubt. Many Moslems would say it is not Islam at all. So would I. One can quote sacred scripture for any purpose. The irony is that no one, not the most extreme Taliban nor the most extreme Christians and the most Ultra Orthodox Messianic Jews actually take the scripture literally. If they did some very strange behavior would happen. Pants would fall down as one is not supposed to wear two kinds of clothing made of different material on your body and leather belts are out. Children would be executed for disobedience and if your brother died you would have to marry your brother's widow, no exceptions. The truth is obscure verses are only quoted out of context to support a particular agenda or prejudice.

Holy War within Islam is not necessarily the same as Jihad. Islamic self-understanding couldn't be clearer: Allah is the God Jews and Christians worship. God according to the Qur'an has spoken to humankind through many prophets and messengers including Noah, Abraham, Moses David, and John the Baptist. Jesus is one of the most important figures in the Qur'an. There is simply no ambiguity

here. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are talking about the same deity. So how can we say it is good to kill one another? Jihad can not be fought against unbelievers. The greater Jihad is the one we fight within ourselves.

I have struggled with this sermon. And still I have no definite answers as to what to do when we are met with evil in religious clothes. I can say be aware, speak up and act but in a way that does not conflict with our own values. To fight this evil with their weapons and demonize our opponents is to have lost already. Show compassion, but do not pretend that you agree. Above all else: do not keep silent! Perhaps in a tongue in cheek way Jon Carrol had a real good point in his article Unitarian Jihad with which I will close this sermon.

*Greetings to the Imprisoned Citizens of the United States! We are Unitarian Jihad. There is only God, unless there is more than one God. The vote of our God subcommittee is 10-8 in favor of one God, with two abstentions. Brother Flaming Sword of Moderation noted the possibility of there being no God at all, and his objection was noted with love by the secretary.*

*Greetings to the Imprisoned Citizens of the United States! Too long has your attention been waylaid by the bright baubles of extremist thought. Too long have fundamentalist yahoos of all religions made your head hurt. Too long have you been buffeted by*

*angry people who think that God talks to them. You have a right to your moderation! You have the power to be calm!*

*We are Unitarian Universalist Jihad. We are everywhere. We have not been born again, nor have we sworn a blood oath. We do not think that God cares what we read, what we eat or whom we sleep with. We will take over television studios and broadcast calm, well-reasoned discussions of the issues of the day. We will not try for "balance" by hiring fruitcakes; we will try for balance by hiring non-ideologues who have carefully thought through the issues.*

*We are Unitarian Universalist Jihad. We will appear in public places and require people to shake hands with each other. (Sister Hand Grenade of Love suggested that we institute a terror regime of mandatory hugging, but her motion was not formally introduced because of lack of a quorum.) We are Unitarian Universalists Jihad, and our motto is: "Sincerity is not enough." We have heard from enough sincere people to last a lifetime already. Just because you believe its true doesn't make it true. Just because your motives are pure doesn't mean you are not doing harm. Get a dog, or comfort someone in a nursing home, or just feed the birds in the park. Play basketball. Lighten up. The world is not out to get you, except in the sense that the world is out to get everyone.*

*People of the United States! We are Unitarian Universalist Jihad! We can strike without warning. Pockets of reasonableness and harmony will appear as if from nowhere! Nice people will run the*

*government again! There will be coffee and cookies in the Gandhi Room after the revolution.*