

Conversations with an Atheist...Religion, Violence and War
Saint Paul's United Methodist Church
January 20, 2008

As we begin this morning, I want to briefly remind us of the topic. We are engaging in a conversation regarding the critiques or challenges from Atheists. Today that conversation will be about violence and war. The suggestion of the new atheists is that the only hope for civilization is to give up on religion. We find this suggestion in the words of Sam Harris' books *Letter to a Christian Nation* or *The End of Faith* or Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. They are on a mission to eradicate religion because they believe that if civilization has a hope for a violence free future that people must wake up and realize that God is a delusion and set religion aside, because they believe violence and war in our world are a result in large part of religious conflict.

So that's the question we're going to answer in today's message. Does violence come from religion? Or, as most Christians believe, is religion the antidote to the problem that produces violence in our world? So we're going to be wrestling with these questions today.

Please take the sermon outline and study guide out from your program as we get going. The sermon notes are an outline of today's message and I'd encourage you to use it to follow along and write down anything you'd like to remember. The study guide on the other side of the page is a way to help you read the Bible for yourself and on your own. There are passages to read each day this week with some commentary and questions. This week we also have included some online articles around this topic and I'd invite you to read them as well as a way to help you think about these issues.

Sam Harris writes in his book, *The End of Faith*, "The most potent source of human conflict, past, present, and future, is religion." And according to Mr. Harris and others, it is going to take waking up from the nightmare of religious belief in order to save our planet. Jim Walker, who is an atheist who maintains a website called "nobeliefs.com" describes Christianity as a violent religion. And while hopefully we see our faith in a very different light and would certainly tell Mr Walker that he couldn't be more inaccurate, we have to at least acknowledge that his critique of the relationship of violence and religious conflict needs to be addressed.

That's what we are trying to do with this entire series. Our goal is to have an intelligent, loving response to some critiques that authors like Harris, Walker and Dawkins are leveling at religion.

Learning Christianity from the New Atheists.

So let's take a look at the two primary reasons that cause these folks to make the assertion that the world would be a less violent place without religion. First, they would challenge us that the Bible itself is a violent book, at least in the Old Testament. Some would say that the images of God in the Bible are vengeful and violent, that God commands that his people wage war and annihilate entire villages and peoples. Now this is a serious issue that we do need to deal with, but I'm not dealing with it today. That is Aaron's job next week and he's going to help us make sense of the disturbing passages of the Bible. So God be with you on that one, Aaron.

What we're going to look at today is the other major reason, which is that Christianity (other major religions too) has a history of violence in the name of God. This criticism has some weight and we have to thoughtfully consider it. We need to unpack this link between religion and violence and search out this answer because there is plenty of justification in our history for this claim.

Like I said, ammunition for their argument is not hard to find. There are the Crusades, when Christians waged war over the possession of the Holy Lands with Muslims in the 11-13th centuries. In the 30 year's war somewhere between 15-20% of the population of continental

Europe was killed in wars between protestants and catholics. Bloody Mary's killing of protestant clergy was just one side of the bloodshed of the English reformation, which is at the root of the violence that continues today in Northern Ireland. And what do we have to say about the atrocities that accompanied the European Imperialist powers that conquered and enslaved vast territories of the world like Africa, Asia, Australia, and the American Continents in the name of king or queen and Christ? What response do we have to the Spanish Inquisition, where Muslims and Jews were forced to convert and then have their confession of Christ authenticated through torture? What answer do we have for the way that Christian settlers on our own continent waged war on the indigenous people and then set up missions to them to teach them about how much Jesus loves them?

We have to answer to that when our friends ask us about the Crusades and all these other situations where religion is interwoven with violence. And the first place I believe we have to respond is to say that there was no excuse. The actions of those people who called themselves Christian is antithetical to everything that Jesus taught or stood for. How could the same Jesus who laid down his own life and who said "Father forgive them" to his crucifiers command his followers to slaughter all the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the Crusades? How does the same Jesus who spent much of his time with the outcasts and non-believers of his world desire for his followers to torture non-believers into confessions like they did in the Spanish Inquisition. How does Christian Imperialism, when European powers conquered continents of peoples, got rich off of their natural resources, held the indigenous people in poverty, how does that look or sound anything like "love your neighbor as yourself?" We have to acknowledge that these are dark chapters of our religious history when the purpose and cause of Christ was distorted, usually by other big agendas for power, wealth or vengeance.

These are complete disconnects from the way of Jesus. It was religion that got twisted and distorted into something it was never meant to be.

We also need to tell our questioning friends that we have learned from our past. We are different now. Not perfect, but different. We are returning to a truer faith and figuring out that violence isn't the path; that it is not in keeping with what Jesus has commanded us to do.

What we've learned is that we need to study what Jesus has to say and then make sure that our actions are in line with the principles of Jesus and that what our religious leaders are saying lines up with what Jesus teaches and does in the gospels. That's why it is very, very important for us to be familiar with Jesus, for us to be reading the Bible for ourselves. You hear it from us all the time. Use the study guide, Don't take my word for it, read it for yourself. We need to know what the authentic message of our religion is so that we can recognize and avoid the counterfeit.

Counterfeits are still offered to us by people in the name of Christ. In 1922, Adolf Hitler made a speech in which he describes his Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. He said in his speech that Jesus was a fighter. And he redefines who Jesus is to his audience to use Jesus to prop up his own agenda. He used the example of Jesus going into the temple courts and driving out the money changers with a whip. So Hitler says that Jesus was driving out the Jewish poison by force and that is what God has called him to do as well. Hitler said that he was going, in the name of truth and justice, to drive out the Jewish poison.

It's a wolf in sheep's clothing. Abject evil is couched in the language of fulfilling Jesus' mission. What an absolute corruption of what Jesus said! So we have to be familiar with the authentic story so we will know when it has been distorted. So you Christ followers out there must be intentional about knowing the real thing. And we must be careful not to allow people in power to use our faith as a way of manipulating us, especially our pastors!

John Knox was a pastor and Calvinistic reformer in Scotland. He was a primary force in forming the Presbyterian Church. On June 11, 1559 he preached a rousing sermon against

Roman Catholicism in the town of St. Andrews. The crowd responded to Knox's message by burning down the Cathedral. It has never been rebuilt. It stands as a permanent reminder of results of distorted religion motivated by a pastor whose message was not authentic to the Jesus he represented.

Alright! This has been an ugly side to our history. And even though we can say that it does not represent Jesus in any way, these were actions that were initiated in the name of Christ, carried out by followers of Christ (at least nominally) and were not stopped by Christ followers who knew them to be counterfeit. We have to claim that...and we should be heart-broken by it. It should serve as a reminder to us to never stand by and let the gospel of Jesus be distorted for some other agenda.

Now, it's time to move on to another statement by the atheists. They claim that the world would be less violent if there were no religion. And I think we need to challenge this claim on their part. And it speaks to the question of where evil really comes from. We have admitted that there have been times when we have violated the very principles of Jesus, but is it true that if we could do away with religion, that we would actually do away with violence? **Is religion really the root of most violence and war?** Will there be violence even if Harris and Dawkins succeed in their mission to wipe out religion?

This question makes me think about two experiments in the last 100 years where religion has been intentionally and systematically eliminated; The Soviet Union and China. What was the result there? Were those nations less violent because of the absence of religion? Was there less bloodshed or more bloodshed? Was there an increase or a decrease in human rights. Was a more just society and more peaceful world created?

When Stalin took power there were over 55,000 churches in Russia. When his power ended, there were only 350 left. And what was the result of that? Estimates are that there were somewhere between 3 – 10 million people put to death under Stalin's regime and another 20 million who died under their oppressive policies.

In communist China under Mao Zedong, with the great leap forward and the cultural revolution and all that, estimates are that somewhere between 30-70 million people who died under those policies.

What this tells me is that if you do away with religion, we are not going to create more just societies; in fact it is just as likely that an even more violent and unjust society will be created. So when we look to attempts in the past, I don't understand how we can really believe that the future without religion will be any different.

But let's try. Let's imagine it, as best we can. Do you remember the song Imagine by John Lennon? I've always liked the music of this song. I don't like the lyrics too much, but there was a time in my life when I wondered if Lennon could be right. It goes like this, "Imagine there's no heaven. It isn't hard to do. No hell below us. And no religion too."

He suggests that if we could imagine a world like that, then maybe we could see a world that would live as one....no more violence if we could just do away with religion. This is, in fact, what many atheists are suggesting. So I began to do some imagining, and I thought "What would that world look like?" and I thought of others who imagine the future without religion. And that led me to Science Fiction writers. I mean how many sci-fi movies or books have Christians in them? There is no religion, no Christianity, no churches. They imagine it without religion!

Are there any Trekkies in the house today? What is in every episode of Star Trek? Conflict! Captain James T. Kirk, the ultimate space cowboy and all the crew have to break out the phasers and put up their force-fields and all that jazz. Every Sci-Fi imagining of the future includes war and violence and no religion. Why is that? Because the Sci-Fi writers know what we all know and that I would debate with Harris and Dawkins that they are unwilling to admit.

Violence is not rooted in religion. It is rooted in the hearts of people. We all have it...this propensity or potential for violence is in all of us.

You see that in yourself don't you? You're driving and someone cuts you off. What do you do? "Wow that was so nice! Praise the Lord!" NO. If you're like me you want to play some bumper cars and knock them around a bit!

Or maybe there's someone in the office that's hoping to get ahead and so they brown nose with the boss and drop in a few hints that you're not doing such a good job. How do you feel about that?

Or if someone else has something you want, what do you do? Well, we don't live in a time when you just go take it from them, we go get one for ourselves. Unless it's in limited supply. Do you remember the scenes when all those mild mannered moms turned mean and aggressive because it was Christmas and they just had to have the Elmo dolls and there weren't enough to go around?

Think about the entertainment we enjoy. Contact sports. When a safety puts the big hit on a receiver and they're both in full stride...I'm like "Whooo. Did you see that?" What about the video games we enjoy. That's probably a bad example, since very few of those have any violence in them.

When someone hurts us or does wrong to us, our instinctive response is what? Vengeance. It is to get even. To pay them back. Hurt for hurt. Eye for eye. I think that is true whether there is religion or not.

The hope for the world is that we move beyond and eye for an eye and we learn how to extend mercy to people. We learn how to care about the people who've wronged us. The hope for the world is that we will define our lives by love, not hate. And for that, I believe it takes religion. Religion is important for moving us from one to the other place. If the source is in us, in our hearts, then the change that is required also has to happen here. And that change of heart is something that requires more than just our will-power. It requires faith.

Now I want to be sure that we mention today that many Christians believe that there is a time for war, that there is such a thing as a just war. Some Christians do not believe in just war...they believe that using violence in any way to resolve conflict is wrong, but a large number of Christians agree that there may be times when conflict may be necessary as the only means left to correct the injustice and the wrong. If you take a look at your outline, you will see that we are going to address some of the justifications for just war.

The just war theory was developed in the 5th Century AD by Augustine. His ideas were latent for many years until the crusades. Toward the end of the crusades, a man named Thomas Aquinas brought them and said, "We've been waging war for all the wrong reasons. We've got to rethink this." And he began to redevelop Augustine's ideas into what is now known as modern day just war theory. There are seven criteria to consider before using war as a means of correcting an injustice. We're only going to look at four today.

A just war must be fought for a truly just cause. i.e. to right a terrible and grievous wrong.

Just war must be the means of last resort. All other avenues of resolution must be exhausted.

A reasonable likelihood of success must be present. You don't want to pay the price for war if you cannot accomplish the correction of the injustices.

The good achieved must outweigh the destructive consequences. This recognizes that war is hell and that there are going to be civilian deaths and great loss of life. So you have to be sure that whatever you gain through the war is a better, more just life for all after the war is concluded.

There are appropriate ways to fight a just war. And Aquinas identified these three principles. **Do not target civilians.** You can only target combatants. **Proportionality** is the idea that the punishment must fit, not exceed the crime. **Minimal force necessary** means that you only use the force needed to accomplish the objective. So these have to do with the method of conducting just war.

The idea behind just war is this. While Jesus does implore us to “turn the other cheek”, to avoid personal revenge and retaliation, there are times when oppressive or brutal regimes or systems must be confronted because of the innocents whose lives are at stake. It is basically saying that the call to create a just world and to “love our neighbor” by standing up against oppression and stopping injustices may sometimes outweigh the non-violent principles of Jesus.

Now of course the theory of just war will always be in debate in the Christian community, and I don’t stand here today to persuade you in either direction. But I do think it is important for us all to understand the principles behind it as we all wrestle with these kinds of questions.

OK, moving on... As we look at **violence, the human condition and the Gospel**, we need to recognize that our natural tendencies are to fight back and not only to fight back, but to get even and that is us at our best. What about human violence at its worst, when it is prompted by jealousy, desire for power or domination, or hatred or greed?

Is it really true that the world would be less violent without religion? Or is it that the only real hope for finding peace in our world is Christianity? If the issue is in the heart, then the answer is also dealing with the heart. Christianity recognizes the reality of the human condition; our thirst for power, our desire for more, our tendency to focus on ourselves, our natural propensity for violence. But then it offers us an alternative. And that alternative is that God has a different plan. And God’s different plan is really important for us to recognize.

Take a look at the two passages at the top of your sermon notes. Jesus lays out part of God’s plan in a very simple phrase. He says, “**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**” **Matthew 5:9 NIV** And then just a little later in Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus says, “**You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strike you on the right cheek, turn the other also... You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.**” **Matthew 5:38-45 NIV**

Two pathways lay before us. One is the way of the world that leads to violence. The other is something very, very different and it offers the possibility of peace. But the challenge is that just sheer will power doesn’t get us there. It requires a change in our hearts. And Christians believe that change of heart comes when we actually invite God to come and work in our lives.

Authentic Christianity is about turning our hearts over to God, allowing God’s grace and forgiveness to transform us, and then living that love out to others from the inside out. It is all about healing and transforming the heart. And as we yield or surrender our hearts to God, He begins to change us from the inside out in ways that we can’t change ourselves. And as God begins to change us, we find that our values change, our ideas change, the way we look at our enemies change. We move toward loving them, maybe not with our feelings, but with our actions, which is what Jesus is wants us to do. And he knows that we’re not going to be perfect at this immediately, but that little by little, we will in time act more and more like he did.

Christianity has not always lived up to this gospel. G.K. Chesterton said, “**The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.**” For our world to have the hope of peace, we Christians have to be more diligent in taking up Jesus’ call to be peacemakers in small and big matters, and that is not an easy thing to do.

In October of 2006 a man named Charles Carl Roberts locked himself into an Amish school in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, and you remember that he killed 5 children and wounded 4 others before committing suicide. And that was devastating, not just to that community but to the whole country as we watched the news and our hearts broke for these people.

But what is astounding about this story is what happened in the aftermath. You probably remember seeing this on the news. At the funeral for this killer was his wife and children were there and do you remember who else was there? Of the 75 people at this funeral, half of them were members of the Amish community whose children were just killed. They could have ostracized this woman, and retaliated in ways to make her life even more of the living hell she was already experiencing.

Instead, they made a determined decision to be there. How could they have felt like being there. They choose to live out love instead of hate. Their presence was telling this family that they would not hold this against her and that they will love her and support her and they don't want her to leave this community.

How do you do that? Where do you find the strength to do that? Who gives you the idea to do that? For the Amish people of West Nickel Mines, it was Jesus, and the power of his Holy Spirit. And instead of continuing the cycle of violence, it was reversed into their salvation. The woman and her family were saved. And the Amish were saved from a life of bitterness and hate. This is what it means to be a peacemaker. And this is what it takes to live out the gospel of the prince of peace, Jesus Christ. I believe that Christians living out their faith authentically truly is the world's only solution to violence.

Will you pray with me?