

## **“Evil Uses Religion as a Disguise” John 18:33-37 Rev. Brian BB**

Ever since the attack on Paris last week, there has been a lot of commentary about Isis and Islam by politicians. We cherish the long tradition in this country of not letting religion define politics, but I think we need to reverse the words as well. politics should never define religion. Just I as a religious leader would never misuse the pulpit to preach my own politics, politicians have no business defining what is (and what isn't) a legitimate religion. That is a discussion for people of faith and that's what I want to talk about today.

The first thing is to acknowledge that religion, all religions have been twisted and used for evil ends. In fact, evil is precisely that: the twisting and misuse of people and institutions - manipulating good things (patriotism, religion, morality) in the service to our worst human temptations (lust or hatred or blind ambition). No one wakes up in the morning and says, “I think I will become an evil person today!” Evil works on us and on society as a whole slowly and subtly,

Our own faith has examples of this. The KKK whose members promise to uphold American values and Christian morality, is an example. I don't think anyone here would use the word Christian to define that organization, but they themselves claim it, A situation similar to ISIS occurred in Europe in the last century. A nation recovering from a devastating military defeat saw a young politician trying to revive his nation with a morality based political movement. He said, “*We tolerate no one in our ranks who attacks the ideas of Christianity. Our movement is Christian.*” His message had a special resonance with young men who were unemployed and frustrated and they followed him willingly. A few years later as he achieved a role in political leadership he said, “*The National Government will regard it as their first and foremost duty to... preserve and defend those basic principles which our nation has been built on. They regard Christianity as the foundation of our national morality...*” The young leader was Adolph Hitler – a man who wanted to make his nation a better place. In hindsight we would be shocked if someone called Nazism a Christian movement but it's leader identified it as such. How could he do that? Unfortunately,

we have to look at the history of the Church to answer that. Hatred of the Jewish people did not start in the 1920's it was an accepted part of culture, taught or allowed by many Christian leaders in Europe for hundreds of years. Protestant reformer Martin Luther himself wrote a book entitled, "*On the Jews and their Lies.*" The history of Anti-Semitism in Christian Europe started in the Middle Ages and just grew as time went on. But how did such hatred get started? If one looks at the four Gospels, the later they are written in time, the more Jesus' death is blamed on the Jewish people as a whole. In today's Gospel, John's Jesus calls the people of his faith and family that raised and taught him, "the Jews." The Gospel goes on to say the Jews as a community force Pilate to crucify Jesus when Pilate did not want to. Why would Jesus talk like he is not a Jew, because the Gospel of John was written when Christianity was separated from Judaism. With the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the believers there, (Jesus' Jewish disciples) - who were the power center of the Jesus movement were dispersed and soon predominantly Gentile Rome became the new center and a whole new religion emerges. And because Christians were trying to survive their own persecution, they had to blame someone other than Rome for Jesus' crucifixion and the Jews were very convenient. Some small twists and adjustments even in our scripture and the Jewish teachings of a Jewish Rabbi are separated from Judaism completely. Eventually the Church forgets Jesus was Jewish and they rarely lifts a finger to protect Jesus' people. And sometimes the Church actually builds the structures leading to Jewish persecution and destruction.

Today another political movement, ISIS, is hiding behind a mask of the religion of Peace, Islam. ISIS too sprung out of a military defeat. It too attracts disaffected young men to join and do horrible things. OMID SAFI, Director of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center and member of American Academy of Religion wrote these words last week

*Paris is part of the global narrative. New York, Madrid, London, Ankara, Bombay, Damascus have all witnessed grotesque acts of terrorism. The primary victims of terrorism by ISIS are Muslims in places like Iraq and Syria. Muslims have been killed on a magnitude hundreds of times the scale of the Paris atrocity... some 8,493 Iraqi*

*civilians were killed and 15,782 Iraqis were injured by ISIS in the summer of 2014 alone.... Yes, the members of ISIS come from Muslim backgrounds. No, their actions cannot be justified on the basis of the 1400 years of Islamic tradition. Every serious scholar of Islam has confirmed this clearly, and unambiguously. ISIS is about as Muslim as the KKK is Christian. If you don't look to the KKK to tell you about God's message of love as expressed through Jesus, don't look to ISIS to tell you about God's mercy as expressed through Muhammad.*

So how do we know when a religion is legitimate in 2015? There are two scriptures that come to mind: James 1:27 *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.* So caring for the vulnerable is clearly part of it, And the idea that we must not follow the culture uncritically – believing everything the world tells us and defining success the way the world does.. The second scripture is Paul's Letter to the Galatians which says *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* These are the signs, the indicators of God's work in the world. Anyone who suggests hatred and violence against another is ever God's will does not understand that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control leave no room for violence. As one of the wisest things on Facebook says, " If your religion causes you to hate someone then you are doing it wrong."

Legitimately following a Religion happens by trying to follow the example of its founders or leaders. The old bracelet WWJD, What Would Jesus Do can apply to any religion: WWBD Buddha; WWKD Krishna; WWMD Moses; or WWMD Mohammed. Can we picture any great leader of faith going into a theater and spraying bullets randomly into a crowd? Would any of the great religious leaders ever do something like that?

Another way to distinguish true religious leaders from pretenders is that true leaders of faith never ask their disciples to do anything they didn't do first. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed lived lives being faithful even when it was dangerous. They were always willing to sacrifice themselves if that was what God needed.. They were leaders in the real sense, going ahead and showing their disciples how to live.

Closer to our own times, Gandhi, ML King Jr. and Mother Theresa are such leaders of integrity. King and Gandhi led non-violent marches from front often receiving the first blows. And Mother Theresa became a powerful moral leader because she spent her ministry wiping the brow of the poorest and most marginalized people of India, the untouchables, as they lay dying. No true religious leader would order someone else to sacrifice themselves without the willingness to do the exact same thing. In regard to ISIS, It is no accident that most suicide bombers are young people. The fact that the leaders of that movement let the young people do that while hiding in safety show them up for the cowards and opportunists they are. Their aim is not a true Islamic State. Their aim is to control with an iron hand a nation and they will use the mask of Islam to try to hide their naked ambition. But we know who they are by what they bring into the world. The fruits of ISIS are terror, fear, anger, revenge, and despair.

As people of faith we do not need to fear these quasi-religious terrorists. In time they will be gone as all terrorists are. Truth and love always have the final word. But until then we can pray like the Psalmist that God “breaks the arm” of ISIS. Notice the writer doesn’t want God to destroy the evildoer, just to break their arm so they stop bringing terror. A broken arm can be mended and gives time to the person to realize the error of their ways. Let us join with God in growing all true religion on Earth. May God uncover the masks of those who would use religion for their own gain. As followers of Jesus may we commit ourselves anew to be people of truth and love.

**Benediction** OMID SAFI Director of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center and the Chair for Islamic Mysticism Group at the American Academy of Religion.

Love shall have the victory at the end of days.

Let there be light inside our hearts.

Let there be light around us.

Let the light permeate us.

Let's rebuild the City of Lights, one illuminated heart after another.

The City of Light needs no more darkness. Let us welcome light into our hearts, and be agents of healing.

**St. Francis Prayer**

"Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love; Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light; Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console,

To be understood as to understand, To be loved as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive; It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life. AMEN"