

WHAT GOOD IS RELIGION?

MATTHEW 5:1-16

JULY 2, 2006

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When Lincoln was running for the House of Representatives from Illinois, he was charged with being “a scoffer at religion” because he did not belong to a church.

During the campaign, Lincoln attended a sermon delivered by his opponent in the race, the Rev. Peter Cartwright, a Methodist evangelist. At a dramatic moment in the sermon, Cartwright said, “All who do not wish to go to hell will stand.”

As Cartwright cunningly expected, only Lincoln kept his seat. “May I inquire of you, Mr. Lincoln, where you are going?” glowered the minister. “I am going to Congress,” came the reply.^[i]

With all due respect to Canada Day which was Friday, I’d like to take a few minutes this morning—on this Independence Day weekend—to reflect with you on the role of religion in these politically charged times.

The question is important not only to those with professional stakes in the game of politics: everyone from campaign managers to political scientists.

It is important for folks like you and me, who struggle to figure out what to do with the talents with which we’ve been blessed and ask ourselves, I suspect, at the end of most days if we’ve been Good Samaritans.

A few weeks ago I met at Spot Coffee on Elmwood Ave. with a friend and member of our congregation who is as thoughtful and insightful a person as I know.

He said, “Isn’t it strange that if the goal of Christianity and most other religions for that matter is to feed the hungry, cloth the naked and visit the prisoner that so much of what we hear from religious groups these days is lobbying for their narrow political agendas. What ever happened to the Sermon on the Mount?”

Author Bill McKibben recently asked the same question. America, he said, is the most professedly Christian of the developed nations, yet the least Christian in its behavior. Somehow we seem to get Jesus and his central message wrong.

Here’s his argument. Depending on which poll you consult, McKibben says, 85% of us call ourselves Christian. We are the most spiritually homogenous rich nation on earth. Israel, by comparison, is 77% Jewish. Fewer of us, 75%, claim to pray daily and only 33% say we go to church weekly but even if 85% is inflated it is still aspirational.

Nothing else unites more than four fifths of our nation. Therefore, says McKibben, nearly everything you can cite about American behavior is also essentially a measure of our professed Christianity. But, he asks, is it Christian?^[iii]

This is not an esoteric question—we’re not talking about angels dancing on the heads of pins or calculating a pre-millennial time-table. Jesus was quite specific about what he expected of his followers. My friend at Spot Coffee named the benchmarks: feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the prisoner. The Sermon on the Mount this morning values gentleness, kindness, purity of heart, and long suffering. So what do we find?

Here are some reasonable indicators. The U.S. ranks last after Italy in foreign aid as a share of the economy. That's fifteen cents per capita, 21 cents if you add personal charitable contributions. It's not that low because we are taking care of our own, 18% of American children live in poverty, compared with, for example, 8% in Sweden.

We don't do well caring for those Jesus referred to as "the least of these": childhood nutrition, infant mortality, access to preschool all get low scores. The point is not, as we already know, that we lag in these areas but that we, as a *Christian nation* lag in caring for those Jesus paid particularly close attention to.

We could add statistics for violence—four to five times greater than our European peers; prison populations six to seven times greater. We are the only Western democracy that still executes its citizens, in states where Christianity is the strongest. McKibben's point is shouldn't we see some signs in our collective behavior if so many of us claim to follow Jesus.^[iii]

Yet, while basic measures of caring for the least of these falter many Americans are focused on an apocalyptic end to history—a rather disturbing trend. A sizeable minority of our people log on to websites like RaptureReady.com where an indexing system tells how close to the End Times we are.

Former House Speaker Tom DeLay, attended a sermon where the preacher said, "the war between America and Iraq is the gateway to the Apocalypse." The Speaker then rose to tell not only those assembled but the 225 Christian TV and radio stations tuned in, "Ladies and gentlemen what you have heard here today is the truth of God." I wonder what Lincoln would have said.

One could argue that the policies of DeLay are in fact hastening the End Times. Tens of millions of readers of the *Left Behind* books provide fertile political ground for such policies.^[iv]

We're talking this morning not just about the apocalyptic fringe but believers whose theology comforts the comfortable and obscures our vision of the neighbor in need. Like some of the sprawling mega-churches of America's new exurb communities.

The messages preached in some of these gatherings isn't loony at all. Preachers focus on you and your needs...the message is for consumers not communities.

A reporter visiting one of these booming assemblies outside of Phoenix found a drive-through latte stand, Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service, and sermons on how to discipline your children, reach your professional goals, and invest your money. Children played with church-provided X-boxes while parents attended aerobics classes called 'Firm Believers'. The bookstore displayed Joel Osteen's bestseller *Your Best Life Now*. A book dismissed by *Publishers Weekly* as, "a treatise on how to get God to serve the demands of self-serving individuals."^[v]

What is the role of religion in our time? Presently, it seems to have little affect on the proportionate use of national resources to help those in need, and is used by some to make the case for policies that justify the accumulation of vast wealth and insular living. All the while ignoring the preservation of the planet because the planet is believed to be close to being extinguished in some bizarre End Time scenario.

Little wonder some folks, not just Bill McKibben and the member of Westminster I had coffee with the other day are concerned. There is an increasingly broad range of voices across the religious and political spectrums responding to radical religion. They are calling for that balance of conscience, reason and faith to which our Founders adhered.

Kevin Phillips, for example, strategist for the Republican Party who, in 1969, predicted the shift of power from the Northeast to the Southwest—has written a new book: *American Theocracy*. Phillips says the intrusion of radical Christianity into local and national politics has chillingly hardened and polarized the country.^[vi]

Jim Wallis of Sojourners—an evangelical community reaching out to the poor and outcast—authored an important book called *God's Politics: why the right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it*. The title says it all.

My friend, Lucinda Hohn shared a book she's been reading: *American Gospel* by Jon Meacham, managing editor of *Newsweek*. Meacham says if totalitarianism was the problem of the 20th century, religious extremism is the problem of the 21st. Meacham's book is a timely reminder to all Americans of the broad and generous views that emerged regarding religion among the Founders of our nation.

He says after much religious extremism and jockeying for power in our first hundred and fifty years, by 1776, America's leaders embraced an openness and tolerance that led to the First Amendment protection of religious liberty.

This hasn't prevented "manifest destiny" from arising in every generation: the idea that Americans are God's chosen people and called to rescue the nations from evil. But Lincoln's image of the United States as God's "almost chosen people" is a better image: we want to do the right thing, but sometimes our leaders from Anne Hutchinson to Martin Luther King, Jr. have to rebuke and remind us what the right thing is.

Where does this leave us with the role of religion in our time? I agree with Bill McKibben. The dominant theologies of the moment undercut Jesus, muffle his hard words, deaden his call, and silence him. Perhaps it's time to just listen to Jesus again—in the Sermon on the Mount and his parables and advice for living like the Golden Rule.

The idea that we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves is as radical and transforming an idea as there is. I recently heard a Zen monk put a twist on the old saying "think global, act local." He said, "think local, act local." You don't have to look beyond local to find your neighbor in need.

At Westminster we've discovered our neighbor in our own West Side neighborhood: children who come for weekly tutoring, first time homeowners participating in Habitat for Humanity, and those who want to believe and want to participate in the American dream and start a small business but need a mentor.

Many congregations are reaching out in similar ways. Churches that do so will increasingly attract people seeking deeper, more meaningful spiritual lives.

But those of us who belong to such communities are also called to articulate to our legislators and to one another for that matter, alternatives to insular, fear-based, comfort-the-comfortable religion.

If you want to talk about Christian bestsellers, even though the book is a little too cookie cutter for me, I like the theology of Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*: you and I were made by a loving God for mission.

If there is any doubt about what that looks like or how it works we were given not one but two examples this past week—two men who could have anything their hearts desired but found life's deepest meaning in the Golden Rule: helping others.

Most of you know by now the story of Waldemar Kaminski whose recent death triggered a spate of newspaper articles.

Kaminski—the East Side grocer who never moved from his Broadway Market location while the neighborhood changed. Quietly, on his computer, in an otherwise modest apartment above his meat market he invested his hard earned dollars and made millions.

Millions he cheerfully gave to local agencies that help underprivileged people, especially children—and Roswell Park Cancer Institute. Kaminski remained anonymous at his request until his death. Perhaps Anne Gioia said it better than anyone else, she said, “he didn't want anyone to know him, but I had to thank him. He felt that if you died a wealthy person, you had not lived a worthwhile life. I don't think he had any regrets.” Those words so close to the simple message of Jesus give me great pause today.^[vii]

And Warren Buffet cut out of the same cloth as Kaminski. Still living in the Omaha, NB house he purchased in 1959 for \$31,500; giving away 85% of his wealth and not to his own charity or children's pockets but most of it to the Gates Foundation—which aims to eradicate twenty, third world diseases and provide every American child a decent education in our lifetime.^[viii]

Mr. Gates himself, transformed from a self-absorbed entrepreneur into a leader of philanthropy.

But let us not take the spotlight off of Mr. Buffet who has raised the bar in giving and living for every one of us in this room. Don't let the size of their stock portfolios distract you. It's the courage of Kaminski and Buffet's conviction to live the Golden Rule that can breathe new life into our made-for-mission souls.

I daresay if each of us assembled in this room decided to give with the intelligence and abandon of these two men Buffalo and Western New York would never be the same.

The mystery of such giving? We become more deeply fulfilled when we give ourselves away and others benefit. It's not rocket science. It's the way God made us. It's what religion is good for. Amen.

[i] Jon Meacham, American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation (New York: Random House, 2006) 13.

[ii] Bill McKibben, “The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong,” Harper’s Magazine, August 2005, 31-37.

[iii] McKibben, 32.

[iv] McKibben, 33.

[v] McKibben, 33.

[vi] Alan Brinkley, “Clear and Present Dangers,”—a review of Kevin Phillips new book American Theocracy: the Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century, The New York Times Book Review, March 19, 2006, 1,2.

[vii] Owen Heary, “Humble Grocer Quietly Gave Away Millions,” The Buffalo News, June 23, 2006.

[viii] Donald G. McNeil, Jr. and Rick Lyman, “Buffet’s Billions Will Aid Fight Against Disease,” The New York Times, Tuesday, June 27, 2006, 1.