

**NEW POWER LOOSE IN THE WORLD: BEFRIENDING THE OPPOSITION  
ACTS 16:16-34  
MAY 20, 2007—MITZVAH DAY  
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We are living in interesting times. Six years ago after 9-11 there was concern about a backlash against Muslims in America and around the world. To the credit of many communities, including ours, efforts have been made to learn more about Islamic faith and tradition.

Our own annual “Understanding Islam” series in the Case Library and this Mitzvah Day are two examples of concrete actions taken to avoid reactionary responses to Islam.

But now, six years after that horrific day in New York and Pennsylvania, the enemy is not perceived to be Islam per se but religion itself.

A recent article in the Wall St. Journal entitled, “As Religious Strife Grows, Europe’s Atheists Seize Pulpit,” talks about the atheist movement in France and Germany. While fundamentalist Islamic terror is the catalyst, all religions are the target of this movement.<sup>[i]</sup>

Part of what’s happening is the struggle of the European Union to find its soul. Does the Union exist merely for economic self-interest or is there more at stake?

It is also true that every century or two things take an anti-clerical turn. The last time was during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when reason (presumed secular belief) was asserted over superstition (presumed religious belief).

But the anti-religion movement goes beyond Europe. Playing into the tension is the strong leaning of the Bush Administration to the religious right—and its frightening views ranging from the environment to the key role of Israel in the end-time.

Many Britons believe that Tony Blair’s active Christian faith enmeshed him with the foreign policy of George Bush. After the debacle in Iraq it’s not too difficult to see how some people are starting to question the worth and value of religion.

A new Pope has added to the consternation in some quarters. Benedict’s views on women, homosexuality, Protestants and modernity sometimes make him sound like a relic of the Middle Ages, yet he is a 21<sup>st</sup> c. pope.

In addition to the anti-church, anti-religion movement is a spate of books attacking religion from every which way culminating in the recent publication of Christopher Hitchens’ *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

Hitchens is a British born writer on a mission. He does not mince words: Pascal’s theology, he says, is “not far short of sordid,”; C.S. Lewis is “so pathetic as to defy description,”; Calvin was a “sadist, torturer and killer,”; Islam is “a rather obvious and ill-arranged set of plagiarisms,”; Hanukkah is “a vapid and annoying holiday,”; King David was an “unscrupulous bandit,” and so on.

Sometimes Hitchens gets so wound up, he attacks the human species itself and likens us to a science fiction experiment in which earth is a “prison colony and lunatic asylum that is used as a dumping ground by far-off and superior civilizations.”<sup>[ii]</sup>

There is no denying that much bad has been perpetrated in the name of religion. Just as there is no denying that much good has been done by those inspired by their faith.

One reason that attacks like Hitchens' fail is because there is such diversity within religious communities. For every negative work, person or legacy about religion you can find a positive work, person or legacy.

Not to mention that Hitchens' attempts to discredit believers in vulgar caricatures of religious faith are so clumsy they would make a first year theology student wince. In a way, religion is like art: there is good art and bad art; good religion and bad religion. Sometimes bad art and bad religion are very popular. But religion and art are also both part and parcel of the human experience—they can't be excised from daily life. There will always be artistic and religious expression.

Does this amount to a tempest in a tea-pot or is there reason for concern about the recent attacks on religious life?

I am concerned and I'll tell you why. Two weeks ago an active member of another downtown congregation asked me, with worry in her voice, what I thought of the recent atheist movement in Europe. Last week a colleague who is participating in a theological project submitted a paper to his peer group on the present anti-religious sentiments—the group was deeply concerned he said.

And just yesterday I sat at a table with members of Westminster and Temple Beth Zion during the visit of biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine and the discussion turned to exactly the question of the value of religion. What would happen, one person at the table asked if we were able to start the world over again, should there be a religious option?

Part of my concern is that drawing a line in the sand will bait members on the fringe of both sides: more tension, death threats, violence. The results could mimic everything from the harsh existence for believers during the Enlightenment to more grave prejudice.

As the social, political, and theological seas shift identifying myself as a Christian or believer will be more and more difficult in this sense: religion and religious adherents will be identified with the legitimate criticisms of extremist religion that get applied to all religion. This is the backlash problem that concerned us about reactions to Islam. In fact this exists within Judaism and Christianity already where the religious right has antagonized less zealous believers and non-believers.

The best antidote I can think of for congregations like Westminster and Temple Beth Zion and Masjid Nu'Man is intentional grounding in our own faith as well as an intentional effort to learn more about our neighbor's faith. That, of course, is what Mitzvah Day is about, but it's hard work and it's just a beginning.

Today's story from Acts is an apt illustration not only of what the future may hold but of what makes any faith vital and compelling.

You may remember last week that Paul and Silas made their way to Macedonia, the tip of Greece, where they preached the Good News and converted Lydia and her household. These were the first Christians in Europe.

Today, Paul and Silas venture out on the first European missionary expedition and they end up getting thrown in jail. Why? Because they exorcise a demon from a girl. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective makes talk of demon possession and exorcism complicated. But I suggest we focus on the before and after for this young girl.

This young girl who is manipulated by her owners is freed after Paul and Silas exorcise the demon that bound her to abusive owners. In fact, that's not a bad definition of slavery—whatever it is that keeps people in slave-like and abusive relationships “demon” is not a bad word.

Harriet Tubman said she could have saved thousands more slaves if she could only have convinced them that they were slaves.<sup>[iii]</sup> The healing spirit of God through Paul and Silas helps this young girl come to her senses.

For their efforts they are arrested, beaten, tried in a kangaroo court and jailed. The slave owner sees to it that the trouble makers who liberated their slave girl are put away.

Part two of the story occurs when an earthquake opens the doors of the prison and Paul and Silas and all the prisoners are able to leave should they choose to. But the apostles convince everyone to stay because they know if they escape the jailer will be executed—a remarkable illustration of loving one's enemy.

Part three of the story: the jailer realizes they chose not to escape on his account and concludes that something much more powerful than political systems and prisons motivates Paul and Silas. He asks to be saved. He wants this same power that can transform a jailer/prisoner relationship to a human relationship. The jailer and his household are baptized. What starts as a disastrous first mission venture ends in more converts for the church.

The moral of the story is that there is a vertical dimension to our ministry that is responsible for anything we accomplish. Call it God, call it the Holy Spirit, call it the higher power. It is a power beyond our control. Yet, if we trust and yield to it invariably peace and understanding and reconciliation and binding up of wounds result.

That's the value of religion. That's why anyone who has been touched by the Holy Spirit is never the same again. Once claimed by that power we are led to do things that can seem useless or irrational or trivial to the rest of the world.

Spending a day with believers of other traditions caring for our community; feeding the hungry, visiting refugee children; giving shelter to the homeless; beautifying a park. Sitting in a prison for the sake of the jailer, of all things, so that he is not put to death.

Some say that religion will never go away because it has evolved the way natural species evolve and survive under particular environmental conditions.

Others say humans are hard-wired for religious belief and spiritual life.

I am not sure about either of those propositions. I do know that coming together with Jewish and Muslim neighbors to spend a few hours getting better acquainted by helping to repair our community is an action that strangely embodies everything we need for a world of peace: a way to end the fighting and violence and bloodshed, if not one fine day, meet the Creator face to face. Amen.

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<sup>[i]</sup> Andrew Higgins, “As Religious Strife Grows, Europe’s Atheists Seize Pulpit,” *The Wall St. Journal*, May 2007.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Andrew Gottlieb, “Atheists with Attitude,” *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2007, p. 77-80.

<sup>[iii]</sup> National Public Radio, quotation from graduation speech by Oprah Winfrey, May 15, 2007.