

Religion's Shadow

In 1972, I was dating my high school sweetheart. She was Lutheran and I was Catholic. We were quite fond of one another and began spending more and more time together. It was the first time the word "love" seriously entered my mind. Perhaps it was "puppy love" or "infatuation", nevertheless, it was real and had my full attention. I began to feel my attraction toward her intensify and the thought of marriage began to enter my mind. Apparently, the thought of our marriage also entered her parent's minds, prompting her mother to ask her: "Aren't there any nice Lutheran boys you could date?" I will never forget when she told me about her parent's concern. It was also the first time I got a glimpse of religion's ugly shadow.

Unfortunately, the same religious institutions that proclaim love and forgiveness, can also promote division, intolerance, and hatred. Although my girlfriend's parents didn't hate me, in fact, I think they were quite fond of me, except when I brought her home too late one evening! But, they did try to use religion as a wedge between us. My experience was minor, but, given the right circumstances within cultures, this "wedge" has the potential to morph into swords, rifles and bombs.

The way to deal with religion's shadow is to pluck it as a "bud" before it blooms into hatred, violence and death.

So, what is the "bud" of religion's shadow in our culture? It is *exclusive claims to salvation* i.e., "unless you recite certain religious formulas and give mental assent to certain statements, or belong to a certain church your faith is unacceptable." This is the primary "bud" that grows into hatred, violence, and war, particularly when incubated within the environment of poverty, lack of education, and social unrest. "Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a lifestyle." Unfortunately, this "thought" is very prevalent within our society and has become the "lifestyle" of Christian fundamentalism.

Given the ridged beliefs of fundamentalism, one can easily predict that when Islamic Fundamentalism and Christian Fundamentalism collide, there will be war. Both ideologies believe they have all of God's truth and others are "infidels" (Islamic term) or "not saved" (Christian term). Rather than inflexibility, what is needed is humility. No human mind or religion can capture the totality of the mind of God, regardless of what the Bible, Koran or any other sacred text says.

The Bible is the Word of God, but, written by human beings, who are both saint and sinner. The Bible points to, but, is not God. Jesus is the Living Word of God who is alive at this very moment. The scriptures point to Jesus, but, are unable to contain Him. Since the resurrection and Pentecost, God has been on the loose! To equate the Bible or the pronouncements of the Pope with God is idolatry, and, one of the pillars on which religious inspired violence is built.

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The statement, "Unless you except Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior, you are damned" or "There is no salvation outside of the Catholic Church (or any other church)" is Christianity's contribution to religious intolerance and violence. Considering people damned to hell is not only judging their soul, it is an act of spiritual and emotional violence. In time, and under the right circumstances, it will bloom into physical violence. If we are serious about curtailing religious inspired violence seen daily in newspapers and on television, we should first take a critical look at elements of our own faith that lend themselves to intolerance and violence.

Not only does exclusive claims to salvation lead to violence, it also distorts Christianity. Ask yourself this question: "Is the person and message of Jesus Christ so weak and unappealing that one must threaten damnation to potential converts if they do not believe?" Whatever conversions coerced by threats will be short lived. There are a great many reasons for following Jesus Christ. The threat of damnation need not be one of them. If you find it necessary, you may want to examine why.

~ Henry