

A Decade of Anti-Intellectualism

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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Ten years ago to the day, I sat despondently in my office together with Siliva Behrend, our Minister of Religious Education. We wondered what role the church should play given the inconceivable events of the morning. And then the phone started ringing and ringing nonstop. People asked just one question repeatedly: Not whether or not there would be a service that night, but at what time the service would start. I remember saying to Silvia, "I think we better call David quickly."

The three of us realized there really were no words in the face of such horror and tragedy, and that the people who would attend church that night would certainly not be in the mood to be talked to. But some words did slip out, not in terms of a news analysis or commentary, but words that touched upon a universal emotion that was as old as civilization itself: Hope.

We could not yet begin to fathom how everything we knew would change; we couldn't begin to guess the developments that would follow. We just wanted to share our sadness with our neighbor. We mourned the loss of people whom we never met but they were now our kin. We worried about our children and the nature of the world they would inherit. We were anxious about the fate of American Muslims and knew not what tomorrow would be like. So we all came together that night in a church packed with members and friends from this neighborhood who had never crossed the threshold of this church before. But we were held together as one congregation, united in soul and spirit, listening to music, lighting candles of hope, and offering prayers for peace and healing. Tears virtually flooded this chapel. The moments of silence were deafening. We had lost control of the world. All we could try to do was listen to one another's heart-song.

In the days and weeks that followed there were many heroes: first responders. And all 8 million New Yorkers became less snarky; the civility in that city was almost unrecognizable. But soon over time the human ties that made us one around the world began to unravel and fade, and the business of our day and the beat of the world fell back into familiar patterns.

It didn't take long for the ugly face of the irrational to respond recklessly to the terrorist attacks. Two wars were launched in the Middle East with nobody on these shores really understanding why. Life in a new and different kind of world began to take shape from airport security to a loss of faith that we might ever believe again in a safe and just and peaceful world.

Ten years after the Twin Towers fell, an earthquake rocked the east coast two weeks ago. The first fear that entered the minds of the millions who felt the tremors was that the terrorists had struck again. We try to lead normal lives, but when the ground shakes, the inner skeptic is immediately unleashed.

My reflections on this tenth anniversary, aside from invoking memories of tremendous loss and profound sadness, prompt a renewed look at religion itself and the failings of interfaith dialogue and understanding. In a book written in 2003 by Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer called *Is Religion Killing Us*, most of us would be apt to say “yes.” His thesis reveals what he perceives as a religious tendency to wage war...for God’s sake.

But I don’t think it’s religion that’s killing us, but the religious...those who squeeze murder and martyrdom into their very narrow and limited understanding of scripture. Granted, Holy Writ among the People of the Book: Jews, Christians, and Muslims, offer a dicey menu of options. We can worship a God of love who demands first and foremost the ethics of compassion and justice. But we also find a vindictive God filled with wrath and hell-bent on destruction. Fundamentalists of all religions are drawn to a God who mirrors human emotions, demanding obedience lest God explode like any man who receives no respect from his children. This God exhibits a kind of pathology in demanding that culture simply cannot progress with new ideas about science and the arts without committing heresy: failing to maintain the old order that pleases the Divine.

Religious fundamentalism focuses on destroying a culture that has progressed intellectually. Fundamentalism cannot accept a new understanding of the cosmos and of life itself that replaces the old timeworn rituals and the personal relationship between God and humanity. The Golden Age of Islam remains a prime example of how intellectualism, rational thought, and progress in the sciences was torn asunder by those adhering to the extreme edge of Muslim practice where life must be permeated by the literal texts of scripture.

Islam, which didn’t emerge until the year 625 CE, developed an empire within its first 150 years. It went from Syria and the Tigris and Euphrates valley, east to South China and west India...then west through Egypt and across North Africa up into Spain. Islam’s golden Age lasted roughly 400 years from the mid-9th century until about 1250.

But those 400 years were unparalleled in learning and also in the integration of Jews and Christians into the culture. The Prophet Mohammad asserted that the ink of scholars was more precious than the blood of martyrs. See – it all depends upon where your religion is focused. There is nothing “wrong” with religion per se.

Islam profoundly influenced civilization in theology, philosophy, and the arts and sciences. Medicine was established as a science based on observation and experimentation rather than conjecture. Islamic scientists developed the essential foundation for what would later be called the scientific method.

Free public hospitals were opened and asylums for the mentally ill. So the Muslims introduced Obama care about a 1000 years ago...and it helped make the era "golden."

Obama and all of us actually, have run into a wall of Christian fundamentalism in this country today, bringing science and progress of any kind to a grinding halt. Islamic fundamentalists back a thousand years ago began cracking the foundations of the golden age where Jews and Christians were teaching in classrooms and holding high government positions. Advances in optometry, trigonometry, astronomy, commerce, finance, and agriculture were targeted by fundamentalists for undermining the "true" values and unbending laws of Islam. Fundamentalists viciously accused everyone of heresy who did not strictly uphold Islamic law. Religious differences were highlighted and different splinter groups emerged. Assassinations were carried out, science came to a halt, books were burned all in the name of a God who had grown wrathful towards his disobedient children.

This God who shuns reason and enlightenment and science is a God introduced to us in America following 9/11 by Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. They proclaimed that the attacks against us ten years ago were God's punishment for a corrupt America. They noted abortion, feminists, gays, and the ACLU. I was disappointed that Unitarians were not on the list. Probably Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell never heard of Unitarians. What else is new? But American Christian fundamentalists oppose science and new values relevant for modern times, in the same blind manner as fundamentalists from any tradition. They all remain tethered to the scripture that cites: "God withdraws favor from sinful nations." They then interpret the sin and of course, the remedy. They violently defend a value system that holds progress hostage to ancient, pre-scientific claims about how the world functions.

If these past ten years have taught us anything, I believe it's that the anti-intellectual fervor within fundamentalism imposes a roadblock to any progress in bringing diverse people together, for allowing science to make inroads into improving the world we inhabit, and allowing the arts to flourish in new and creative ways.

One of the giants in Christian theology, Paul Tillich, presents religion as I believe it ought to be understood, not as something that will kill us. No religion, according to Tillich can claim ultimacy. Religion must recognize its own inadequate mediation of the Ultimate. Religion must trumpet not only the truth of their claim, but also the limitation of their claim. "The ultimate is infinitely apprehensible yet never entirely comprehensible." I think Tillich implies that though Jesus reveals (or mediates) God, we must look beyond Jesus...look beyond the particularity of Jesus to the universality of God. Jews, Christians, and Muslims may get a glimpse of God through their respective mediations, but God is so much more than what any one faith could ever proclaim as an ultimate truth.

Fundamentalists throughout the world not only lay claim to a unique understanding of God...who happens to be their God, but justify violence in the world as though God is whispering his commandments exclusively to them. This is not religion, but extreme fundamentalism.

What has transpired again, almost unfathomable in this advanced day and age, is that the extremists in fundamentalism have not only captured the scripture of their faith as the foundational and literal truth for all people, but they have made the text foundational for a political movement.

Not only is this what led to the development of Al Qaeda, but also the last ten years especially have produced a frightening movement in our country. According to Bill Moyers, a faithful Baptist, "America is not yet a theocracy, but the Republican Party is, and they are driving American politics." When you look at all the current candidates vying for the presidency of our nation, science is fully under attack. Climate scientists are part of a conspiracy to gain private wealth, and intellectuals undermine the values of our Christian nation. This resembles exactly the language of Cordova, Spain in the year 1150...when the Golden Age of Islam began to show signs of strain.

The lessons of 9/11 have not yet been learned. We act as though 9/11 taught us to take hard-line stands against Middle East governments. But the lesson of 9/11 is time-tested, deeply entrenched in the menace of fundamentalism, and in this case Islamic fundamentalism. But the Christian fundamentalism we are experiencing today brings on a terror all its own. Our presidential hopefuls might as well be working for the God Squad, taking aim at anybody and everybody unwilling to wind the clock back to when straight white men ruled supreme, just as God intended. I am further perplexed by the notion of all these candidates wanting to lead our government but they don't believe in government. What's that about?

Today marks the tenth anniversary of America's loss of innocence, a belief that we were invincible and untouchable. The world has markedly changed, no longer able to provide for our children the carefree environment that most of us have known. It's a tragic loss, for those who perished so needlessly ten years ago, and for all that was changed in the world. Rather than encourage and support our intellectual development and diversity and scientific insight, we -as Americans - - have gone on the attack against what was once the golden age of America -- in the name of fundamentalism.

Until we accept the primary idea that God sponsors no one religious denomination and has no favorite people, we will forever be held hostage by those who pretend to know what God thinks and wants, and they will never hesitate to kill in the name of religion.

This tenth anniversary marks a sobering time for our nation. We mourn the loss of life but need also to mourn the freedoms we have lost since then. This is not just a

time for looking back. The first decade in remembrance of 9/11 must also look ahead, and commit as a nation to love our neighbor and love the stranger....commit to a more peaceful world, and to allow freedom of thought in the arts and sciences to move us forward to shaping a better world for our children. Amen