

# Minutes 1

## Lakeside Freethinkers

**Those present** Scotty McMillan, Paul Bennett, Rich Birkett, Mike Wood, Lew Crippen, Ron Napier, Stephen Segall, Hank Shriver, Jerry Smith

**Date** May 20, 2015 4:00pm–6:08pm

### 1.1 President's Remarks

Our meeting was well attended with 16 members present. This was rewarding, given that our winter visitors have left. The vice-Chair and Secretary were absent.

New, or old members after a long absence were: Scotty McMillan, Paul Bennett, Rich Birkett, and Mike Woody. Welcome to all.

Lew Crippen gave an interesting talk entitled, Religious Conflict: Is it Due to Religion? A copy of his presentation is below.

A presentation and/or a book report is needed for the next meeting. Please contact me or the Program Committee Chairperson, John de Waal to schedule your presentation.

We have an "official announcements only" mailing list. If you would like to be on this new list and receive only official announcements, please reply to this email.

Also, if you would like to be removed from the Lakeside Freethinkers mailing lists, just reply to this email.

## 1.2 Presentation

Religious Conflict: Is it Due to Religion?  
by Lew Crippen

This talk was prepared for the Unitarian Universalists in early April. As this was delivered as a part of the UU service, some parts of that service are either germane to the talk or serve as a bit of an introduction to and preparation for the talk.

Therefore I am going to include some readings as a preface to my remarks.

Taken from Karen Armstrong, writing in *The Guardian*:

Ever since the Crusades, when Christians from the western Europe were fighting holy wars against Muslims in the near east, western people have often perceived Islam as a violent and intolerant faith even though when this prejudice took root, Islam had a better record of tolerance than Christianity

From Saint Augustine writing in *The City of God*:

... while individuals should not resort immediately to violence, God has given the sword to government for good reason. Christians as a part of government should not be ashamed to protect peace and punish wickedness. They who have waged war in obedience to the divine command, or in conformity with His laws have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the first commandment, "thou shalt not kill." But say they, the wise men will wage just wars. As if he would not all the rather lament the necessity of just wars, if he remembers that he is a man, for if they were not just he would not wage them, and would therefore be delivered from all wars. Christians by divine edict, have no choice but to subject themselves to their political masters and should seek to that they execute their war-fighting duty as justly as possible.

And finally two passages from the Qur'an:

By the sun and its brightness  
And by the moon when it follows it  
And by the day when it displays it  
And by the night when it covers it  
And by the sky and He who constructed it  
And by the earth and He who proportioned it  
And inspired it with its discernment of its wickedness and its righteousness,  
He has succeeded who purifies it,  
And he has failed who instills it with corruption.  
And

Among the people there is he whose discourse on the life of the world pleases you, and he calls on God as witness to what is in his heart, yet he is an unyielding and antagonistic adversary. When he turns and leaves, he walks about corrupting the earth, destroying crops and livestock. God loves not corruption.

I had originally titled this talk, *Zealotry: Is it Due to Religion*, but on reflection, I changed it for a number of reasons, perhaps the most important, is due to the

derivation of the word Zealot. It is a term in Hebrew, deriving of course from the Greek that means One who is zealous on behalf of God'. While this might prove to be interesting, I thought that a focus on the original Zealots who in the first century sought to incite the people of Judea to rebel against the Roman Empire and to expel them from the holy land by force of arms would lead me down a path that would be too specific for the direction that I was taken during research and writing.

But not to worry, there is plenty of material from which to choose regarding religious conflict.

Much of the material used in preparing this talk came several sources, most especially Karen Armstrong, former nun and author of several books and papers on religion in an historical context and William Cavanaugh, most especially his seminal book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*. I will try to indicate when I am quoting one of them directly.

As George Carlin commented in his hilarious analysis of the Ten Commandments, "More people have been killed in the name of God than for any other reason". This has so much appeal, especially among liberals, secular humanists, agnostics, atheists and other pinko commies that it is rarely questioned. And even some of the religious right would agree, as would much of the liberal religious community.

On the flip side of the liberal tradition, are the Taliban in Afghanistan, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Islamic State in the Middle East, the Hindu right, the Jewish right, the Buddhist right and on and on.

We have as examples, and often cited, The Crusades, The Inquisition, The Troubles in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Pakistan and India, Abyssinia and Somalia, Nigeria, The Lebanese Civil War, Bosnia, The Thirty Years War, Sudan and on and on. Further this list does not even cover the conflicts described in the Bible or the sweep of Islam from Medina across the Middle East through to India.

Just to cite one current example, consider that even though Barack Obama insists that the lawless violence of ISIS has nothing to do with Islam, many will disagree, even some as liberal as Bill Maher.

These religious conflicts are often celebrated during the holiest and highest of holidays. My wife, Trudy and I recently attended a Passover Seder dinner where the Haggadah (a text that sets forth the order of the Seder) was read by the attendees, as a shared experience. Our son's future mother-in-law commented that as the daughter of communists, her experience had always been to just talk about peace, harmony and everyone working together during Seder. It was a revelation, later in life for her to find that the Haggadah details wars fought and won by the Jewish people and that killing and winning by either the Jews or by God, was a good thing something to be celebrated.

All this would seem to support Carlin's (as well as others) contention that "more people have been killed due to war than for any other reason. But does his hold up under objective analysis?

Now for a brief history lesson or for most of you, a review (leaving out the academic arguments).

Going back to the Enlightenment, (and more on this later) we in the west, learned from bitter experience that the fanatical bigotry which religion seems always

to unleash can only be contained by the creation of a liberal state that separates politics and religion. Never again, we believed, would these intolerant passions be allowed to intrude on political life. But why, oh why, have Muslims found it impossible to arrive at, as Richard Dawkins suggests, a logical solution to their problems? Why do they cling with perverse obstinacy to the obviously bad idea of theocracy? Why, in short, have they been unable to enter the modern world? The answer must surely lie in their primitive and atavistic religion. As Karen Armstrong writes in *The Guardian*,

Perhaps it is because we in the west developed our view of religion as a purely private pursuit, separate from all other human activities and especially distinct from politics. After all, warfare and violence has always been a feature of political life, and yet we alone (in the West) drew the conclusion that separating the church from the state was a prerequisite for peace. Secularism has become so natural to us that we assume it emerged organically, as a necessary condition of any society's progress into modernity. Yet it was in fact a distinct creation, which arose as a result of a peculiar concatenation of historical circumstances; we may be mistaken to assume that it would evolve in the same fashion in every culture in every part of the world.

We now take the secular state so much for granted that it is hard for us to appreciate its novelty, since before the modern period, there were no "secular" institutions and no secular' states in our sense of the word. Their creation required the development of an entirely different understanding of religion, one that was unique to the modern west. No other culture has had anything remotely like it, and before the 18th century, it would have been incomprehensible even to European Catholics. The words in other languages that we translate as "religion" invariably refer to something vaguer, larger and more inclusive. The Arabic word *din* signifies an entire way of life, and the Sanskrit *dharma* covers law, politics, and social institutions as well as piety. The Hebrew Bible has no abstract concept of "religion"; and the Talmudic rabbis would have found it impossible to define faith in a single word or formula, because the Talmud was expressly designed to bring the whole of human life into the ambit of the sacred. The Oxford Classical Dictionary states: "No word in either Greek or Latin corresponds to the English 'religion' or 'religious'." In fact, the only tradition that satisfies the modern western criterion of religion as a purely private pursuit is Protestant Christianity, which, like our western view of "religion", was also a creation of the early modern period.

In short, or in other words, before the modern period, there was no separation of church and state. They were one. As an example, one State or set of States was called "The Holy Roman Empire". A whole violent period of English history revolves not around Papists' and protestants, but rather the struggle as to who would be in control of England. Would it be Henry the VIII, or the Pope? Would it be Mary, Queen of Scots or Elizabeth?

Added to that, it was European wars, in the 16th and 17th centuries that helped create what has been called "the myth of religious violence". It was said that Protestants and Catholics were so inflamed by the theological passions of the Reformation that they butchered one another in senseless battles that killed 35% of the population of central Europe. Yet while there is no doubt that the participants certainly experienced these wars as a life-and-death religious struggle, this was also

a conflict between two sets of state-builders: the princes of Germany and the other kings of Europe were battling against the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, and his ambition to establish a trans-European hegemony modeled after the Ottoman empire.

If the wars of religion had been solely motivated by sectarian bigotry, we should not expect to have found Protestants and Catholics fighting on the same side, yet in fact they often did so. Thus Catholic France repeatedly fought the Catholic Habsburgs, who were regularly supported by some of the Protestant princes. In the French wars of religion (1562-98) and the thirty years war, combatants crossed confessional lines so often that it was impossible to talk about solidly "Catholic" or "Protestant" populations. These wars were neither "all about religion" nor "all about politics". Nor was it a question of the state simply "using" religion for political ends. There was as yet no coherent way to divide religious causes from social causes. People were fighting for different visions of society, but they would not, and could not, have distinguished between religious and temporal factors in these conflicts. Until the 18th century, dissociating the two would have been like trying to take the gin out of a martini.

Further, much, perhaps most of the violence, war, death and destruction of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was not due to religion. The American Revolution, the French Revolution, The Napoleonic Campaigns, the American Civil War, WWI, The Russian Revolution, WWII, The Holocaust, Korea, Vietnam, the killing fields of Cambodia and more were all political or primarily political struggles. Even such seemingly religious conflicts as "The troubles" in Northern Ireland and Bosnia were more about politics than about religion. As one observer replied to my query as to how was an atheist viewed in Northern Ireland, the reply was, "Well in Ireland you are either a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist". The subtext of course being that the struggle was really about political control, not about religion.

Just considering modern history, this list puts the lie to Carlin's contention.

When Napoleon's armies invaded Prussia in 1807, the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte urged his countrymen to lay down their lives for the Fatherland. If we define the sacred as that for which we are prepared to die, the "imagined community" of the nation had come to replace God. It is now considered admirable to die for your country, but not for your religion.

Separating the State from religion while not forgetting that for much of history and for much of the world, the term religion is a relatively new concept, really did not happen until the Enlightenment, the Renaissance and finally the Industrial Revolution. One could now die honorably for one's country, but not necessarily for one's religion. Put another way, "killing for religion is bad, killing for the state is often good." The myth of religious violence thus becomes a justification for the use of violence. So now the tortured logic becomes "We will have peace, once we have bombed the Muslims into being reasonable."

When secularization was implemented in the developing world, it was experienced as a profound disruption, just as we have seen, as it had originally been in Europe. Because it usually came with colonial rule, it was seen as a foreign import and rejected as profoundly unnatural. In almost every region of the world where secular governments have been established with a goal of separating religion

and politics, a counter-cultural movement has developed in response, determined to bring religion back into public life. What we call "fundamentalism" has always existed in a symbiotic relationship with a secularization that is experienced as cruel, violent and invasive. All too often an aggressive secularism has pushed religion into a violent riposte. According to Karen Armstrong, "Every fundamentalist movement that I have studied in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is rooted in a profound fear of annihilation, convinced that the liberal or secular establishment is determined to destroy their way of life."

This has been tragically apparent in the Middle East. And it is even more apparent in the United States (perhaps the model for separating the church from the state) where the religious fundamentalists are reacting desperately to the increasingly secular society. And not just Christian fundamentalists: orthodox Jews are beginning to demand to change seats on airplanes so that they are not required to sit next to a woman, and in France (the other model of secular separation), Muslims are rising against dress standards in schools that impact their fundamental beliefs.

We unthinkingly believe that violence that is labeled religious is always irrational, particularly virulent and reprehensible. Violence labeled secular, on the other hand, no matter how regrettable, is often necessary and sometimes even praiseworthy for the job it does defending us from religious violence.

I'm not sure about you, but my brain is about to explode.

As William Cavanaugh, professor of religion at DePaul University, suggests in his book, "The Myth of Religious Violence", There is no doubt that, under certain circumstances, particular constructs of Islam or Christianity contribute to violence. Where the above arguments [about the intrinsic ties of religion to violence] and others like them fail is in trying to separate a category called religion with a peculiar tendency toward violence from a putatively secular reality that is less prone to violence. There is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief in, for example, the biblical God.

And what may we conclude from any or all of this? I suggest that many wars and much violence have had nothing at all to do with religion. And that much of what seems to be religious violence have had any number of motivating factors. That many wars of religion, especially in pre-modern times, were in fact wars of economy or wars of power structures and the like.

And that much of the current violence associated with religion, is in part, due to a lack of understanding in the west that non-secular societies view very differently the state and religion, much closer to pre-enlighten Europe. That there is little to separate the state from religion in many of these countries and societies.

I suggest (a bit cribbed from Thomas Aquinas) that in order for a war to be a war of religion, the combatants must be motivated by religious differences, that the primary cause of the war was religion, that those religious causes were separable from political, economic and social causes at the time of the wars and that the rise of the modern state was not a cause of the wars.

I believe that a careful analysis using these criteria would lead us to the conclusion that most, if not all of these wars, acts of terrorism and violence, were in fact not wars of religion.

What do you think?