

## Groping for God

---

A sermon by Benjamin Broadbent

April 27, 2008

Acts 17:22-31

### I.

You may have noticed that in our day and age and culture, religion does not have the best reputation. Among the most enlightened citizens of western civilization, religion is, at best, irrelevant superstition, and at worst, the very means by which the greatest evils of humanity are allowed to flourish. Those of us who continue to practice religion or to be affiliated, however loosely, with some form of religious body, do so precariously. Perhaps we are ashamed. Perhaps we do not want to offend. But our religion is largely a private affair. We don't want to explain, or can't explain what it is that draws us to this peculiar way of life and this highly questionable way of thinking, believing, and trusting.

The so-called new-atheists are enjoying a heyday. Whether proclaiming *The End of Faith*, *The God Delusion*, or that *God Is Not Great*, their books keep selling and their arguments keep prevailing. Belief in God, they claim, is part of the problem and not part of the solution. Belief in God is an irrational and uncritical assertion that allows people to justify both great ignorance and great evil.

I have found these books, especially Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, to be intellectually compelling, even more so than many of the books on faith that claim to be revealing God's will for our lives. While compelling, I tend to wonder while reading them, upon what limited impression of religion are they basing their argument? I'm reminded of something a professor, whose class I took at Harvard Divinity School, said when a student asked, "Why should people practice religion when religion hurts so many people?" Professor Hallisey, a professor of Theravada Buddhism responded, "Religion doesn't hurt people. People hurt people."

While it's convenient to blame religion for the ills of the world, it's really a tired old move that people have been making for millennia to justify their own prejudicial viewpoints? In a recent issue of the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, William Cavanaugh asks two questions: "What percentage of Americans who identify themselves as Christians would be willing to kill for their Christian faith?" AND "What percentage would be willing to kill for their country?"

“It seems clear that,” Cavanaugh concludes, “at least among American Christians, the nation-state is subject to far more absolutist fervor than Christianity. For most American Christians, even public evangelization is considered to be in poor taste, and yet most endorse organized slaughter on behalf of the of the nation as sometimes necessary and even laudable.”

## II.

Rather than divide up humanity into the enlightened non-religious and the misguided religious, it might be more helpful to argue, as Paul does in his speech to the Athenians in front of the Areopagus, that everyone is “extremely religious.” Paul is in Athens, that enlightened Greek city, the origin of modern philosophy and western culture. As Acts 17, verse 21 tells us, everyone in Athens loved to spend their time discussing new ideas. Among the crowd are Epicureans and Stoics, the two dominant philosophical schools at the time. Epicureans were materialists who believed the world existed by chance. Stoics, on the other hand, were rationalists, guided by analytical observation and careful reasoning. Do these viewpoints sound at all familiar?

The issue at hand for Paul is the presence of countless idols throughout the city, which the Epicureans opposed but tolerated and the Stoics regarded as harmless and irrelevant. Paul’s sermon in Acts 17 is an apologetic, an argument for faith in Jesus Christ by appealing to the sensibilities of the Athenian populace. Notice he does not mention the name of Christ. He quotes Greek poets and philosophers. For example, the quote claimed even today by Christians, invoking the God “in whom we live and move and have our being,” comes, most likely from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE writer Epimenides of Crete.

To this crowd of fashionable and curious philosophers, Paul begins his sermon, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” We don’t know how the crowd received these words. We do know the effect of his sermon as a whole. Some scoffed and some signed up. But I wonder how they received the observation of how “extremely religious” they were. I imagine someone saying that to a cross-section of our own culture. Some would nod in agreement and take it as a compliment. Others would vehemently deny the assertion and take it as an affront. Some would stand in middle ground: “Really, I’m more spiritual than I am religious.”

### III.

I think it's helpful and honest to consider the degree to which we are all religious, and perhaps extremely so. That is, all people respond to religious questions, such as:

What is the purpose of life?

What is the highest good?

Upon what principles shall I live my life?

Is the nature of the universe good, bad, or neutral?

How do I make a change in my life?

How can we effect a change together in our nation, culture, or world?

Responses may be assertions and they may be denials, but we all respond in some fashion to these questions. Our responses are not only intellectual, but also actions. People who are Christian, atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, etc. answer these core questions of life and their answers manifest themselves in how they view the world, treat other people, and live their lives. The amazing thing is that not all Christians come to the same conclusions. Neither do all atheists agree with each other. Nor all Buddhists.

A few years ago, I attended the annual Jewish-Christian Dialogue luncheon here in Colorado Springs. I remember two things from the event:

1. I was the only one who didn't wear a tie. I wonder if that's why I haven't been invited back.

2. I found myself agreeing Dr. Pamela Eisenbaum, the professor at Iliff Theological Seminary who is also Jewish, more than any of the Christian presentors who had, on the whole, a much more less critical view of Christianity than I do.

My point is that, if we are indeed all religious, even extremely so, it might explain why we have much in common with those who label themselves differently than we do. Maybe our religious affiliations - Jewish, Christian, Freethinker, agnostic - are less important than our ideological commitments. Maybe to be human is to be religious and maybe we would do better to concentrate less on sectarian distinctions and to argue worldviews instead.

It is perhaps the quintessential religious move to justify our group's superiority by claiming that we have transcended the contingencies of other groups. Protestants said, we have no need for the religious hierarchy of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. Early puritan congregationalists said, we have no need for the artful depictions of

Christ as in the English cathedrals. Liberals have said, we have no need to place too much importance on the Biblical text, for there are many other sources of inspiration. Atheists have said, we have no need for God, for scripture, for worship. We believe in reason alone, in empirical observation alone.

I once asked a seminary colleague of mine, what do you make of it when someone identifies himself as “spiritual, but not religious.” He said, “What I hear is, ‘I like God, but I don’t like people.’” An acknowledgement of the universality of human religiousness is an acknowledgement that we can’t escape our humanity, can’t avoid our belonging to each other. We can’t escape the big questions that hover and haunt our every day, every thought, every relationship. We can’t escape, can’t transcend the groundedness of our human condition, even our human thinking, even our human science, as impervious to fault and flaw as we might claim it to be.

#### IV.

There is no remedy to relieve us, no rhapsody to release us from religion, in which we are steeped. When we claim we have transcended it, we simultaneously reclaim our captivity to it. Rather than pretend to be non-religious, and therefore better than people who continue in their misguided ways, we would do better to engage authentically and openly with people, to debate, like good Athenians, ideas on their own merits, and not to dismiss people and their ideas based on prejudices that discount them outright.

From a Christian point of view, and for a Christian, there is no other live alternative, we assert in the freedom of faith that the unknown God of the Athenians is none other than the only real God, who made the world and everything in it. We also trust that God is also the Lord of heaven and earth. God does not live in shrines made by human hands, whether the shrine is a church, a denomination, a book, a priesthood, or a defined practice. Neither is God served by human hands. In other words, all of our attempts to disavow and distance ourselves from churches, denominations, even worship is another religious attempt to justify ourselves over and against other people and over and against God.

God does not need anything from us and yet gives to all mortals life and breath. God created humanity from one ancestor, made all nations to inhabit the same earth, allotted the times of their existence, allotted

the boundaries of the places they inhabit, so that they would search for God, grope for him and find him. She is not far from each one of us. Indeed, in her, we live and move and have our being.

Groping for an unknown God

We don't claim too much for ourselves, but we stand confident in the way that gives life

Groping for an unknown God

We don't let others off the hook, but neither do we convince ourselves that we've somehow transcended all ignorance

Groping for an unknown God

We know that God is not like gold or silver or stone, but a non thing more precious than any thing

Groping for an unknown God

We know we are God's offspring, called to repent again and again from the ways of death, called to face and to follow the resurrected one who speaks a word of life

Groping for an unknown God

We don't care anymore whether religion has a good or a bad reputation, for while we practice religion, as do our fellow humans, we do not belong to it

We belong to the one who has no name, who is more real than any philosophy, any ideology, indeed any religion, even this one, which we deem to be so precious. Amen.