

“When Our God is Not God”

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I should probably explain from the outset that my reading of the lectionary texts for today was heavily influenced by the news of the day. This is especially true for this lament found in Jeremiah. Everyone knows the text in the NT where we are told that “Jesus Wept” (John 11:35). But this is the text of the “Weeping God.”¹ As I read this text, all the television networks and newspapers were carrying the story of Pastor Terry Jones and his plans to burn the Qur’an. Last year, he had t-shirts made proclaiming that “Islam is of the devil” and very few people listened. This year he told his church he was proclaiming an international burn the Qur’an day, and the media carried his message across the world. When I saw the story, I imagined God weeping.

It would be easy to dismiss Terry Jones’ rantings as simply a fringe expression among Christians. He has no credentials from any recognized denomination. His little non-denominational church has around 40 members. He runs his own religious ship and has very few followers. But the truth is that Terry Jones is not representative of a small group of people on the fringe. The problem is much larger than Terry Jones. Christian leaders across the US are spouting anti-Islam messages. Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, is routinely quoted on

CNN and other media outlets saying that the violence of Islam is passed down through the DNA of Muslims. And did any of you hear the recent remarks of Robert Jeffress, the pastor of First Baptist Church in downtown Dallas. During my mid-teens, he was a few years younger than me, sharing Sunday School classes with my little sister. Today, he is the pastor of First Baptist with a membership of well over 10,000 middle and upper class professionals, the movers and shakers in the city of Dallas. On August 22, last month, this is what he told those gathered in the church:

“Islam is an oppressive religion. It is a religion, and here’s the deep, dark, dirty secret of Islam, it is a religion which promotes pedophilia, sex with children. . . . It is an evil religion; it is an oppressive religion; it is a violent religion that has incited the attacks around the world and the attacks against our country . . . I believe as Christians and conservatives it is time to take off the gloves and stand up and tell the truth about this evil, evil religion.”²

Within days of the comments of this Dallas pastor, Michael Enright, a videographer for an interfaith religious group, slashed a New York taxi driver with a knife on August 23 just because he was Muslim. On August 26, Omar Rivera stumbled into a mosque in Queens while Muslims were praying, denounced everybody present as “terrorists,” and proceeded to urinate on their prayer rugs. On August 27, the headline of the *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper carried a headline that read: “Your Friends and Neighbors: the Face of Homegrown Terrorism.” Any Muslim in Canada suddenly becomes a terrorism suspect. And, to make matters

worse, a poll taken last year by *McLean's* reveals that 45% of Canadians believe that mainstream Islam promotes violence.³ Somehow the image of a weeping God seems an appropriate response.

Islamophobia, an irrational fear of Islam, has entered into the mainstream of North American vocabulary since 2001. There is, unfortunately, no shortage of precedents for this kind of behavior. Both Canada and the United States possess a history of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism, of racism and homophobia. These kinds of irrational fear, often fed by Christian ministers and leaders, have led to atrocious and violent acts against both persons and property. These attitudes and behaviors threaten the very foundation of a pluralistic secular democracy. But, more than that, they represent a common theological heresy – they are heresy because they rest in our natural human tendencies to worship a “God” made in our own image. And here is where Jeremiah has a word to speak to us from this week’s lectionary reading.

In the verses preceding our text, God condemns the false worship of Judah, “for the people of Judah have done evil in my sight, says the Holy One; they have set their abominations in the house that is called by my name, defiling it (7:30) . . . yet they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush (8:12).” By the time we get to our text in verse 18, condemnation has turned into lament. Feminist scholars and others have made a rather convincing argument that our verses this

morning are all in God's voice, rather than Jeremiah's voice. God is overcome with grief because the people are sick unto death. These texts portray an emotional God, a God who suffers because Israel is acting in ways that are contrary to its identity.

The paths of the people are set, in spite of their doom. They claim God is with them, but they follow their own way and do whatever they want to do. Their's is a sickness of the heart, not of the body. That is why neither the balm in Gilead nor the presence of a physician can heal them. God's people are guilty of idolatry, of worshiping at altars of their own making. And God's grief cannot be contained. God cries for the people, but there are no more tears to cry.

The army from the North is descending, destroying everything in its path. But the people continue to take God for granted. They presume God is in the temple and actually insist that God be present. After all, that is God's job. But God has left the temple because the Israelites don't "act justly one with another" and because they "oppress the alien." They expected God to swoop down to save them from the onslaught of the Babylonians because it was the liturgical time for God to appear. So, they remind God of the proper order of events. But God does not appear. God wants repentance, but all God gets is the certainty of the people telling God where God is supposed to be and what God is supposed to be doing.

In verses two and three of chapter 9, we find that God has had enough of grieving. God longs for a room at a traveler's lodge to get away from this "band of traitors." "They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth, for they proceed from evil to evil, . . . they do not know me, says the Holy One." The people were sure they knew God; they could describe where God was to be and how God was to act, but God said, "they do not know me."

In September of 1986, my youngest daughter Cara and I were walking down the aisle of a grocery store shopping for dinner. She was four years old at the time. As we were shopping, we heard a man's rather stern voice booming over the loud speaker system: "Thomas come to the front office. Thomas, please come to the front office." Cara suddenly squeezed my hand and looked up at me. She spoke with amazement in her voice: "Daddy," she said, "Was that God?" In that simple question, Cara revealed a great deal to me about the notion of God she had developed during her young life. At four years old, she placed her faith in a rather narrow notion of God. In her mind, God was likely a white male with a deep voice who sounded like he was born in the South and who told people clearly what they were to do. The store manager's voice fit her picture of God perfectly.

Cara's tendency to place her faith in a very small notion of God is not limited to young children. Jeremiah tells us the people of his time created a God in

their own image. Their certainty about God seems not unlike that of contemporary pastors like Terry Jones and Robert Jeffress. Theirs is a God who hates Islam and demands that all Muslims become good Christians so they can attend churches like the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida or the First Baptist Church of Dallas.

All of us are about to begin another year of theological education. We are here to learn something about God and about ourselves and about our neighbors, those whom the God of our faith asks us to love as we love ourselves. Along the way, we might learn something about diversity, about other religions, about global Christianity, about contexts and cultures. Scholarly work in religion and culture has long observed that all human beings place their faith in something. The name “God” can simply be shorthand, a symbol if you will, to describe the thing in which human beings choose to place their faith. As you reflect upon God this year, keep that in mind.

If we place our faith in small ideas, in relative ideas, we will live our lives defined by the smallness of our ideas. If our notion of God is defined in light of what we perceive to be our self-interests, or by our claims of privilege, or, as in the case of those in the news in recent days, by our irrational fears of those who are different from us, we worship at altars of our own creation. That is precisely the time, I think, when it is appropriate for somebody to remind us that “Our ‘God’ is

not God.” In such cases, we can only hope we come to our senses before God weeps and begins to look for a room at a travel lodge somewhere, anywhere, away from us.

¹ See *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), Volume VI, on “The Book of Jeremiah,” written by Patrick D. Miller, where, on p. 653 he cites J.J. M. Roberts, “The Motif of the Weeping God in Jeremiah and Its Background in the Lament Tradition of the Ancient Near East,” *Old Testament Essays* 5 (1992): 361-74.

² See <http://www.wfaa.com/video/raw/Dr-Robert-Jeffress-statement-on--101772118.html> for the video.

³ The poll is from April 2009; see <http://www2.macleans.ca/2009/04/28/what-canadians-think-of-sikhs-jews-christians-muslims/>