

“THE THREAT OF UNFILLED VOIDS”

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When I was in second grade, we moved into Detroit’s western suburbs. Ours was one of the last freshly-built new homes on Gary Lane. One home on our street didn’t sell and remained unoccupied. Deserted for months, all kinds of nasty things came to occupy that home. Broken windows, filthy language scrawled on walls, cigarette butts from kids hiding to smoke, and other unmentionables. Yes, I snuck in there once or twice. It truly creeped me out. A sticker was posted on the window that blared “condemned.” Even a second grader knows that is not good.

A home is a delightful thing, isn’t it? You’ve provided us a lovely home to dwell in. We enjoy building homes with the poor and the experience is a beacon of hope. Cecile and I can’t wait to attend a housewarming party of friends in a few weeks.

But if a house isn’t filled with goodness so it can flourish, guess what? That bright space will quickly fill with shadows. And what was meant to be good, even holy, actually becomes something bad, even evil. *Nature doesn’t tolerate a vacuum.* It holds for houses, for schedules and children, and even Middle Eastern countries—where the house has been cleaned out but nothing good filled the void. “Then the demon goes and brings along seven other spirits, more evil than itself.” Jesus forewarns us, “They enter and live there and the last state is worse than the first.”

Really, this is what Jesus’ enigmatic Parable of the Unclean Spirit means. Something good can be shaped or something evil can be ousted from something good. But if that entity is not actively filled with goodness, it will fester and rot, much as, if you clear a garden of weeds, but then don’t mulch, even worse weeds grow in.

Last week David Brooks was either mindful of Jesus’ parable or the folk wisdom it represents in writing his NY Times column. You see, among the increasingly secular societies of the prosperous west, it grows more popular to blame religion for things like wars and terrorism. You have heard people say before, “Don’t you know it’s a fact religion has caused most of the wars in the history of the world?”

It’s odd that at a moment when the prosperous, civilized western world becomes more secular than ever that religion is blamed for terrorist violence in the world. In their book *Encyclopedia of Wars*, Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod survey 1,800 conflicts and found that less than 10% had any religious component at all. My fellow Brazos Press writer William Cavanaugh said the same in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*.

Isis is perceived as a brutal, archaic death cult that has peculiarly resurfaced in the modern world while we busy ourselves pursuing life, liberty, and happiness. Isis’ relationship to Islam is not unlike how, say, the KKK spun off of Christianity, also spewing righteous hate. Of course, Isis’s stain of evil is deeper, darker and

more ambitious than our barbaric sects. But both are statistically miniscule aberrations of Islam and Christianity with impact disproportionate to their numbers.

So secularists—from philosophers to celebrities—decry the existence of religion because the whole of being godly is judged by rotten tips. But guess what? A lot of smart people have predicted and rooted for the demise of religion, from Ludwig Feuerbach to Thomas Jefferson, from Karl Marx to Sigmund Freud and John Lennon. But the place of religion in our hearts and society stubbornly persists. All of those predictors are dead, but the faiths whose demise they predicted live on.

Why is that? Brooks says we're inherently meaning-seeking creatures. The result is a stalemate. Our technology gives us choices, but deep purpose is rare; we call ourselves free, even self-invented, but only belonging offsets deep loneliness; we have information at our fingertips, but life itself means less and less, despite our affluence; we worship lifestyle as our sacred cow, but crave deeper, sturdier and spiritually centered ways of life. Finally, most important, we amuse ourselves with gossip tidbits, but our lives lack a grand narrative. And when human life lacks a grand narrative--like God choosing a people out of aged Abraham and Sarah, or God reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ--something will fill that void.

Notice this. The secular substitutes typically filling the void left by religion—nationalism, racism and political ideology—all lead to disaster because they can't bear the freight of providing ultimate meaning and addressing our final concerns. When secular substitutes fail many then abruptly seek out religion, often as blank slates without spiritual formation, sometimes—often within Islam—going extreme.

Brooks rightly claims that the answer to bad religion is not no religion. That won't happen because, as we told our Confirmands last Sunday, we are hard-wired for God. We are by nature spiritual beings. So the answer to warped and corrupt religion is robust and healthy religion. If we don't fill that void with good, expect evil.

Just one more insight from Brooks before I turn it back toward our here and now. While religion does not cause wars, it does nurture what he calls groupishness. A down side of groupishness is how religion can perceive ones outside its group.

When religion brings what theologians and ethicists call a *thick narrative*, a deep and nuanced, a penetrating and revealing vision of God's ways with humankind, we find ourselves thrown into creative dilemmas and entering sacred mysteries. We seek faithful reflection and prayerful acts that humble rather than puff us up. Such faith communities become visible as they renounce power while embracing loving adoration toward God along with caring service and empathy for neighbor.

In *thinner religious narratives*, we observe what some call pathological dualism. Half-baked religion loves to deal in strict binaries--who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is damned, who is faithful and who the infidel. As though any human could ever credibly decide such a thing! Jesus constantly warned us

against such damning arrogance. Actually, Jesus even died a victim of it. Thinner religious narratives find ideology displacing theology and the destruction of outsiders—like a restored caliphate—overruling acts of mercy, kindness, and justice.

But let's bring this home. Do we show the thin, power-hungry, ideological binaries of bad religion? What do you hear at FCC? "Whoever you are, wherever you are along life's journey, you are welcome here." We hear those words often and with feeling. We also welcome with Jesus' wide arms on the cross, forgiving all who wronged him, inviting in all of God's beloved children, including the thief to his left.

Or how about: our goal is a strong spiritual core built around Jesus' selfless love, but with porous boundaries, that allow access, which are not policed or enforced. I have explained to our new members that we are a confessing church—yes, we articulate our faith—but we aren't a creedal church using dogma as a litmus test.

But do we see signs of thick narrative here, marks of holy mystery ennobling us? Do we insist upon the high ceilings of a God whose ways are not necessarily our ways, whose gifts are generously given to those who look nothing like ourselves? UCC pastor and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was invoked last week on CNN to help make sense of these last ten days. Niebuhr said in the final analysis the Christian is one who lives with the tension of having and also not having the truth.

As it happened, last Sunday Gary and I worked with our Confirmands on doubt. We don't privilege doubt as though it is higher than faith, it isn't. But neither do we fear doubt. We recalled the man seeking Jesus' healing for his epileptic son. He was at wits end, frantic, and full of fear and incomplete faith. "Lord, I believe," he said, "help my unbelief." And that was faith enough for Jesus to heal his boy.

As stewards of sacred mysteries, we needn't pretend to know it all. The more we glimpse God's vast design, the more aware we are of how comparatively little we know. Doubting inadequate images of God lets us grow into a truer grasp of God. So last week, as Heather Raker honestly confessed that she still hasn't figured out "this religion thing", no one called her an unbeliever. We identified with her. It endeared us. And the week before when Josh Gleason said he didn't know what happened when Jesus supposedly walked on the water, no one called him infidel and sent Josh packing. Friends, the mystery of our great God is deep and thick.

I say this because, as a dozen or so today affirm our covenant of faith by uniting with us, and as many dozens approach to affirm our covenant of faith promising support, know that the implications of what you're doing aren't just personal—entering deeper relationship with God They aren't just social—making Darien a better place. The implications of what you are doing are global and even cosmic. For as we let God fill our lives and sphere of influence with things good and holy, we brace ourselves also to face into the reality of evil in God's world. Where else can we make this kind of difference? Where else can we know such an impact? Amen.