

The Problem with Being Extremely Religious

Psalm 66:8-22; Acts 17:16-34

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It's not always a compliment to be called "extremely religious." Extreme religion, as you know, can be extremely wrong and extremely dangerous. Here is something that every religious person must come to terms with: nothing is made true simply because we believe it to be true, even if we believe it passionately.

At a recent family gathering, I saw an uncle whom I've not seen in a number of years. He's the uncle who played a trick on me when I was a child. He had a fancy, new watch. It had all the bells and whistles. To my young eyes, it looked like something right out of the future.

My uncle said, "David, have you seen my new watch? It can talk."

I thought, "Wow! What could be more cool than a watch that talks?"

My uncle said, "Come over here and put your ear close to it and you'll hear it tell the time." So I walked over and put my ear close to his watch and listened.

"Did you hear it?"

"No, sir. I didn't hear it."

"Try again and this time listen very carefully."

With everyone watching, I put my ear close to his watch again and listened very carefully.

"Did you hear it that time?" he asked.

I smiled and said, "Yes, sir! I heard it!"

Of course, my uncle and everyone else watching this torture of a small child burst into laughter.

The watch didn't talk. A significant other told me that it did, and I really wanted to believe that it did. People were watching, waiting for me to experience what they too probably had experienced. I wanted that watch to talk so badly that I convinced myself that I heard it. Nothing is made true simply because we believe it to be true, even if we believe it passionately.

To be called extremely religious is not always a compliment, that is true. Extreme religion leads to ignorance, intolerance, violence, and potentially great evil. Baptist professor Charles Kimball, who wrote the book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, wrote, "It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history" (p. 1). While that is all true, I also have to ask this question: Who wants to be called slightly religious? Oh, he's not extremely religious; he's only a little religious. That certainly was not acceptable to Jesus or Paul or Luke. So what is it that tempers passionate religious commitment so that it is an authentic reflection of one's faith? How do we embrace our faith with great zeal without taking on the harmful, negative characteristics of fanatical religion? What is it that makes one a saint and not a terrorist? We can say at least this much: extreme religion must be accompanied by extreme humility and extreme honesty.

I love the account of Paul's encounter with the extremely religious in the book of Acts. He was in the city of Athens, home to the great Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and others. Athens was like a university town, a place of great learning and high culture, where the intelligentsia discussed the great ideas of their day. But our text says that when Paul entered the city of Athens he was "deeply distressed." The language Luke uses here suggests a visceral response. The city was "full of idols," figures of stone and wood that the people there believed to be gods. That was their religion, and they were extremely religious.

Paul was a Jew, remember, and had no toleration for idol worship. He knew well the second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol." So like a Pauline Socrates, the apostle Paul went to work, teaching in the synagogue and to anyone who would listen in the market. And I guess this was bound to happen. The philosophers heard Paul's teaching. They

were not impressed, calling Paul a “babblers.” It’s an interesting word in the Greek language. It literally means “seed-picker,” referring to someone who picks up scraps of learning. It was not a compliment. To the highbrow Athenian philosophers, Paul was just another uninformed, unsophisticated, uneducated preacher of “foreign divinities.”

Paul’s message didn’t fit their philosophy, so the text says that they “took hold of” Paul—strong language—and escorted him to a place called the Areopagus, which was like an outdoor courtroom. That is often the response of extreme religion, isn’t it? It is intolerant of the beliefs of others and is quick to “take hold of them” if it can. At the Areopagus, they would hear what this babblers, this uncouth preacher of foreign divinities, had to say. Then they would render their verdict on his message.

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, gives us an important insight into the people of Athens. Just before Paul spoke, this is what Luke writes, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” Novelty attracted their attention more than truth (*Interpretation*, Willimon, Acts, p. 142).

Paul began his address with what he intended to be a compliment, calling them “extremely religious in every way.” Nothing in the text suggests that he was being derisive. He meant it. There were extremely religious. As he entered their town, he observed all their idols, “a forest of idols,” someone has said (*NIDB*, Vol. X, p. 244). There was even one altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” They were so extremely religious that they worshiped one god they didn’t even know! I guess they wanted to make sure they had all their bases covered!

Notice that Paul showed respect for their religion. He did not ridicule. Instead, he laid the claims of his faith alongside the claims of their faith for critical evaluation. If any religion cannot stand critical review, it is not worth the parchment it is written upon. He began with Nature. It was a real God who made the world and everything in it, Paul said. God was not created by human hands or served by human hands. No artisan carved this God from stone or wood and set him on a pedestal in the city square. To the contrary, his God carved the world and everything in it, giving breath and life to it. Could the philosophers honestly look at the created order without imagining a real divine Force behind it? No piece of stone or wood can do that, regardless of how passionately one might believe it can.

Paul then moved to humanity. The real God who created the world also created real men and women who populate the face of the earth. And notice the common characteristic the peoples of the earth share. This is a passage we all need to have highlighted in our Bible. Don't miss this. Why were human beings created? Here is what Paul said:

so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

Searching for God, Ultimate Truth, seeking the creative Force beyond us, is encoded in our DNA. Our drive to find God is part of what makes us human. We search for the Holy Other. We seek what is beyond us. Sometimes it is groping, blindly feeling for what we know, what we *know*, must be there. And what we may not realize as we grope for God is that God is close, not far from each one of us. Whether we have language to account for it or not, “in him we live and move and have our being.”

Paul finished his sermon. Some mocked Paul. Yes, he was nothing more than a babbler, just as they suspected. Others agreed to continue the discussion. And yet a few others, including a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris, believed Paul's message and went with him.

For Paul being extremely religious was not enough. He too knew that extreme religion could be extremely wrong and extremely dangerous. What Paul says is that we must understand that we are like every other human being on the face of the earth. We are created to seek God, to fumble through the darkness at times, to search until we find. That's part of the essence of being human. Augustine was right. God made us for God's own self, and our hearts never find peace until they rest in God. This is not an American phenomenon or a Christian phenomenon. It is a human phenomenon because God made us to seek God.

So what are we to do? We don't want to be gullible and believe in talking watches. We know that nothing is made true simply because we believe in it. We don't want to contribute to the religious fanaticism that is doing such harm to our world. And we don't want to settle for little, mediocre religion either. Nobody wants that. What are we to do? We must seek God. That is in the essence of who we are. So let us do so with extreme humility. No one person will find everything there is to find of

God. Humility will protect us from intolerance and attempting to force our belief on others. And let us do so with extreme honesty. That will save us from being gullible.

By all means, let no one say of us, “Oh, he’s not extremely religious; he’s only a little religious.”

Closing Prayer

Lord, our temptation sometimes is to run the other way. So many are doing so much wrong in your name that we sometimes wish to distance ourselves from them. Help us instead to find the better way. Help us to model the way of Jesus your son. Amen.