

God, Life, and Everything "The Religion of That-Was-Then"

President Obama threw many Christians into a tizzy last week at the National Prayer Breakfast when he said, "Humanity has been grappling with these questions throughout human history. And lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ. In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ."

Many complained that the president had thrown Christianity - and specifically American Christians - under the bus. They argued that the comparison of atrocities committed by Christians in the name of Christianity had no bearing on the atrocities of ISIS, which are totally different. They claimed Obama was ignorant of history because, for example, the crusades were a totally defensive 200-year-long invasion.

One of my favorite comments I heard on this was, "That was then. This is now." A variation on the theme of, "We don't talk about the past. It's ancient history, and history has nothing to do with today." This reminds me of a Florida town that once housed a boys school which had a horrible history of abuse often resulting in death. Researchers began excavating upward of fifty unmarked graves. But locals are angry at the researchers for dredging up the past. "That was a long time ago," they say, "Let sleeping dogs lie."

Which is just another way of saying, "We don't want to look at anything bad we ever did." It's like a religion with us. If we did something bad in the past, we are absolved because it was in the past. Let's move forward and never ever look back.

Now, back to the president. What was his point in noting that we Christians have an ideologically violent past? He has been trying to stem the tide of anti-Islamic hysteria that has swept this country for the past two decades. This is no mere fear of terrorists, either. It is outright loathing.

I hear it all the time. "All Muslims want to wipe out every other religion; it's right their in their Koran." "All Muslims are terrorists." "They're barbarians!"

What President Obama did was point out that A) our bloody history precludes us from saying "They are so horrible while we are so pure." And B) even if there is blood on the hands of many Muslims right now (and only a tiny fraction of the Muslim world), history shows us that those societies that were once homes of monsters can and do change.

But I think the thing that really ticked people off is the suggestion that Christians - let alone Americans - could ever be bad. After all WE are good, and if WE are good, who cares about the past?

Let's take a quick peek at the past, because President Obama barely scratched the surface.

Regarding the Crusades, I wonder how anyone could see them as defensive. The pope authorized the various European kingdoms to raise troops to overthrow the Muslim-led kingdom in the Holy Land. True, it was hardly a peaceful government either, but it won Israel in a way most European countries could relate to - through battle. The thing about the Crusades is that the marauding troops often attacked European towns to win booty. And when the Muslims proved to be too difficult to destroy in the end, crusaders often slaughtered unarmed Jews within Europe.

The Inquisition, of course, was not a one-time aberration, either. It lasted from the 13th into the early 20th century. It was highly creative - and horrendously brutal - in its forms of torture meant to force confessions out of its victims.

Ah, but that was then, and this is now. Besides, that was Catholics, not Christians (as I've heard some claim). And it wasn't even in America!

Well, the president did mention slavery and Jim Crow. It doesn't take much to find writings of slave owners justifying slavery on the basis of their Christian values. Take, for example, Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens in his "Cornerstone" speech on the eve of the Civil War. He said, "With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system.... The substratum of our society is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race, that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator."

If that's too far back in the past, then how about our treatment of Native Americans. We think of it as the "old west," but the nightmare has gone on for a very long time for those who were here before us. Probably you know about the Trail of Tears and Andrew Jackson's illegal deals to steal land from American Indians, but did you know that the government worked with the churches (yes, including my own Episcopal Church) to wipe out all traces of Indian culture? Missionaries had been building schools for Indians for a long time. But when the government decided to build boarding schools for the purpose of "civilizing" Indians, they put administration in charge of the churches.

At these schools, children were forcibly removed from their parents, not allowed to see them for years at a time, beaten for speaking their native language and forced to accept Christianity. Oh, and one of the founders of the school system made clear that the purpose of the schools was not actual education but assimilation - in 24 years, one school graduated only about 150 students.

But that was then. This is now. All is forgotten. Unless, of course, you live on the reservation.

Oh, and Jim Crow? That's such a gentle name for brutalities visited upon African Americans by European Americans. These of course included lynchings (after brutal beatings), including of children - but it was not uncommon to burn them alive as well. These were public events to which parents brought their children for entertainment. And then, as if to showcase their perversion, they published postcards of these atrocities.

But that has nothing to do with us today. We don't torture anymore. We don't kill people who are different from us anymore. We don't target people for their race or religion anymore. The past has nothing to do with us and nothing to teach.

What a heretical religion to believe the past doesn't affect the present.

But wait. The Koran was written in the past. If the past means nothing, then neither do those passages about wiping out unbelievers that people keep cherry-picking. I certainly wouldn't want anyone to cherry-pick the bible's passages that encourage violence toward non-believers. Like the one about smashing babies heads against rocks or wiping out whole communities of unbelievers.

But I do believe in looking to the past and learning from it. I'll even cite scripture from Jesus when he encountered those who preferred to look at the sins of others over their own: He said, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."