

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

IS ORGANIZED RELIGION GOOD FOR TODAY'S COMMUNITY?

Sermon delivered by Imam Genghis Khan

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

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- Peace be with you all ... it's an honor for me to worship with you today ... We begin with Praise, Thanks, and Asking of God ...

Indeed, all Praise and Thanks belongs to God,

The Lord of all the Worlds

The Possessor of Mercy, The Bestower of Mercy

The Master of the Day of Judgment.

It is You alone we worship, it is You alone we ask for help * Guide us on the Straight Path,

The Path of those upon whom you have given your

bounties, * not the path of those who have earned Your anger, nor those who are misguided.

(The Qur'an, Chapter 1)

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ * الرَّحْمَنِ

الرَّحِيمِ * مَا لِكِ يَوْمَ الدِّينِ *

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ *

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ * صِرَاطَ

الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ * غَيْرِ

الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

- The sermon titled: Is Organized Religion Good for Today's Community? is a reflection on the role of dogma and historic institutionalization vs. individual spirituality and connection with God. (I will use the word "Religion" as we all understand it for a while but will give a more precise definition later.)
- I'll follow three timelines
 - 1) As per today's Scriptural readings - Jesus' (pbuh) time - 2000 years ago
 - 2) The time since the revelation of The Qur'an - Muhammad's (pbuh) time - 1400 years ago, and
 - 3) Today, especially here in America
- Because these timelines look - at face value as being about different religions - I must lay down one foundational thing summarily - (this might be new to some of you, and we can discuss more afterwards):
 - The timelines are not about different religions. According to The Qur'an, God has taught humans only one religion which in English would be called Peace. Picture it as the trunk of a tree. Throughout history, countless

times humans have created sects that branched off the main trunk - relabeling themselves with either geographic-, ethnic-, or personality-based names. In doing so they created - what we see today as our topic: multiple institutionalized religions named as such - whereas the origin had always been a common spirituality, a common teaching.

- This common teaching has been done by the Prophets God had sent - some of whom He sent with Scripture. All are on the same, original trunk - even though the people to whom they were sent were on these diverse, self-created branches. So, The Qur'ān holds equal: Abraham as an example and role model, Moses an example and role model, Jesus as an example and role model, Muhammad as an example and role model, and every single other Prophet whose names may be known or not. To clearly communicate this, I quote from The Qur'ān verses addressing the Prophet Muhammad (listen to the list of Arabic names I'll translate):

Indeed, We have inspired you [Muhammad] as We inspired Noah and the Prophets after him and as We inspired Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and [Prophets of] the Tribes and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon and to David, We gave The Psalms. * Messengers whose stories We have told you before and [others] whose stories We have not told you; and to Moses, God spoke directly. * Messengers who brought Glad Tidings and Warnings that humankind might have no excuse against God after the Messengers had come, for God is Almighty, Wise.

إِنَّا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ كَمَا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ نُوحٍ
وَالنَّبِيِّينَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ
وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ
وَعِيسَىٰ وَيُؤُسَ وَهَارُونَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ
وَأَتَيْنَا دَاوُدَ زُبُورًا * وَرُسُلًا قَدْ قَصَصْنَاهُمْ
عَلَيْكَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَرُسُلًا لَمْ نَقْصُصْهُمْ عَلَيْكَ
وَكَلَّمَ اللَّهُ مُوسَىٰ تَكْلِيمًا * رُسُلًا مُبَشِّرِينَ
وَمُنذِرِينَ لِقَالِ الْإِنسَانِ عَلَىٰ اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ
بَعْدَ الرُّسُلِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا

(The Qur'ān, Chapter 4 Verse 163-165)

- So as a Muslim - A follower and student of The Qur'ān - with complete equality - Abraham is my Prophet and my role model, Moses is my Prophet and my role model, Jesus is my Prophet and my role model, Muhammad is my Prophet and my role model, along with every single Prophet God sent - and The Qur'ān is my textual source and with it: The Gospel, The Psalms, and The Torah. So, I can learn from and speak to these three timelines for they are common to me, common to my religion. Common to Islam.

- Two underlying themes in this topic of institutionalized religion are human arrogance toward each other, and the passage of "long" time with drastically changing world circumstances. Simply put, people formed these branches - sects, to exploit all that results from a "them and us" mentality as political, economic, and social practices evolved through time. Even though Prophets were sent to call them back to the main trunk, "them and us" was a powerful force, outlasting the human lifespans of the Prophets so that long time passed, and these institutions persisted.
- So was the situation at the time of Jesus since the time of Moses ... for as our readings [Deu 6:1-9, Luk 10:25-29, Mar 12:38-40, Mat 5:20] today showed - the *Generational message:* " ... The Lord our God is one Lord And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" - was clearly transmitted to Jesus' time and preserved and taught by him.
- But the Gospel readings show that centuries of institutionalization made religion into a practice of showing off by the religious elite, pretense, pandering, stagnation, contrivances, and a privileged lifestyle for themselves at the expense of hardships for common people. Jesus was in stark and marvelous contrast to this. He enlivened and unfettered people, connecting them directly to spiritual salvation with profound simplicity (e.g., Beatitudes-Matt. reading). We can say from studying the Gospels that while he preserved and honored the ancient Scriptures - the Commandments, he was against the institutions and organizations of the religious elite. The Gospels' answer to our title question is that organized religion was not good for the community at that time.
- Switching timelines - six hundred years after Jesus, something remarkable happened. God ended human Prophethood but preserved and left a final Scripture - The Qur'ān. Accessible across multiple cultures for all time after, its existence would build a textual tradition and a civilization that would value literacy, language, and science. The Islamic Civilization since then had linked the Greek and European Civilizations, influenced Scholasticism, the Renaissance, Philosophy, Protestantism, law, politics, and all branches of science, so much so that the numerals we use today are still (incorrectly) called Arabic Numerals, Algebra is still Algebra, Algorithms are still Algorithms, in criminal court we talk about "proof beyond reasonable doubt," while in civil court it's "preponderance of evidence" - legal theories developed by Islamic Scholars in Spain of the 13 and 1400's, and so many more examples.

- But in as much as our Western Civilization had inherited all that from the Islamic Civilization, an important part of the Islamic Civilization continuously, significantly declined - the religious part. With slow decline from the 1000's - the Crusade period - to steeper decline after the fall of Muslim Spain in 1492 - to a complete bottoming out in the European colonial period of 1798 to the 1970's. - resulting in the tumultuous, sometimes ugly Muslim World seen today.
- The fundamental driving forces of this decline is well-summarized by Muhammad An-Nuwayhi, an Egyptian Literary Professor, who lived from 1917 to 1980, who said:

"[If] we ask ourselves how it was that a movement which at the beginning was revolutionary, progressive and modern, could be turned into an agent of intellectual petrification and social stagnation, our reflection will lead us to two factors which were not present in Islam originally, but which appeared together during the ages of the decline of the Islamic Civilization and became so firmly rooted that people imagined them to be among the fundamental principles of the Islamic religion. The first was the appearance of a caste [the Elite Religious Scholars called Ulama] which monopolized the explanation of religion, claiming that it alone had the right to speak in the name of religion. The second factor was the conviction of this caste that any laws, decisions, and solutions found in earlier religious sources were binding doctrines whose observance was obligatory, and which could not be modified or changed in any respects, whether they dealt with matters of doctrine or touched on affairs of daily life."

- This statement is a factual, excellent summary which I can affirm from my own in-depth studies. So, as in Jesus' time, for Muslims since about 1000 years ago, institutionalized, and organized religion has not been good for the community.
- Before I switch timelines to today, there are three things I'd like to briefly reflect on. 1) The implication of God ending human Prophethood 1400 years ago while leaving only Scripture, 2) the role of human interpretation of Scripture and 3) the meaning of the Arabic word that translates in English as religion.
- I find the first one very profound, liberating and equalizing. Simply put, with no more Prophets coming, there should nevermore be any confusion that there are intermediaries being present in the direct relationship between each individual

person and God. While this has always been the case in God's teaching, the new absence of that special class of humans - The Prophets - should forever remove any concept that there is someone more special than any one of us in relation to God. We may then conclude that God intends for each of us to directly access Him.

- Hand-in-hand with that is then the role of human interpretation of God's Word - Scripture. Ever since the final Prophet, all we now have that defines religion is textual material - words on pages transmitted through history. In order for those words to communicate information, the human must read, study, analyze and extract meanings and conclusions. Therefore, anything that is learned from a Scriptural, textual source is completely influenced by human interpreters. It might be too extreme to say religion is human made, but the reality is - since the source of religion is textual - religious teachings are a product of human interpretation. That said, without any more human Prophets, but with the right education, we may then conclude that God intends each of us to directly interact with His Word.
- And thirdly, the Arabic word used in The Qur'ān that gets translated in English as religion is the word *dīn*. Simply put, its root meanings are two: judgement and accountability (like owing a debt). So, the technical meaning of this word is: "The basis for making our judgements and we are accountable for those judgements like one who owes a debt." So, any way of life that uses some source and methods for reaching conclusions and making judgements would be called *dīn* in Arabic - especially so for textual based sources and methods.
- For the implications of this reflection, we can now lastly shift our timeline to today in the U.S. and from this definition of the word *dīn*, we see we're no longer talking about just religion alone, but both religion and politics.
- As for religion, without listing the scandals, schisms, and controversies, we know organized religion is less and less appealing. Pew Research has reported 30% of Americans as unaffiliated with any religion and from 2012 to 2017 the growth of those who say they are spiritual but not religious had grown from 19% to 27%. The key thing is that these numbers are growing. In the Muslim community we see young people who grew up in the mosques twenty years ago, keeping a distance today and practicing privately. So even today, organized religion seems to be working less and less for the community.

- But for a number of those who still say religion is important, they have a recurring intersectionality with politics - none more so clearer than the recent Supreme Court. Note that based on the definition of the Arabic word *dīn* - how we make our judgements - the textual analysis based constitutional interpretation squarely fits in that definition. I must tell you - the abortion case majority's argument that since the word "abortion" was not mentioned in the constitution, it cannot be a federal right - rings very familiar with Muslim scholarly discourses during the steeply declining days of the Islamic Civilization when they said that new and different things that would facilitate the lives of people cannot be done because they were not mentioned in The Qur'ān - a very poor conclusion. I've seen where this perspective has led in the Muslim World's decline and I'm bracing myself for the same in America. So, it seems that such organized politics may not be good for the community either.
- So, what are we to do? If we go back to the reflection about the end of human Prophethood and that each person should be in direct relationship with God and interpreting the religious texts, then does organized religion even matter? Envision that the role of religious scholarship is simply, objectively to teach textual interpretation, the rules of grammar, language, context, meaning and usages of words, etc. - hermeneutics. Wouldn't that facilitate many more people to build a relationship with God's texts and thus individual relationships with God without the dogmatic burdens that make life difficult - like Jesus did? This is a path I've been on with the Muslims who touch my life and I've seen merit and hope. It's something for us to consider - what would happen if we facilitated more spirituality and less dogma, less organized religion? - The past repeatedly and the present definitely points us in that direction.
- I pray to God for all of us that we can truly do this to benefit ourselves and our next generations - for if it truly is His will for each of us to have an individual, textual based relationship with Him, then we seek His Help and Guidance to fulfill His Will for us, so we pray:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.

Amen.