

## What is a religion, essentially?

Each religion has a set of teachings, and they may or may not crossover to the teachings of other religion. Whatever the teaching may be, what it boils down to is the interpretation of the teaching, and how the members of the religion apply that interpretation into daily practices.

So I would like to interpret a text in the Bible, and see how one's interpretation would affect the way one practices one's religion.

Here is the scriptural sample from John 11:

<sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; <sup>50</sup> you do not understand that it is expedient

for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." <sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death.

**T**he readers are forced to wonder: "Was Caiaphas speaking what God inspired him to speak, or was he speaking his own opinion?"

The writer of John added the commentary that it was not Caiaphas' own accord that he spoke thus. If the readers accept the authority of such a commentary, then the readers would have to agree with the writer's interpretation that God put the words in Caiaphas' mouth. If the readers accept that Caiaphas was speaking what God inspired him to speak, one might further ask: "Is it God's will to sacrifice one person to save many others?"

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If the answer to the question is yes, then we must accept this as the divine principle, since it is revealed through the saying of Caiaphas.

**I**f we accept it as the divine principle by which we order our decision making, how does it stand with Jesus' teaching we have just read this morning:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

For me, it is difficult to harmonize loving one another with marking one individual for death, so that the rest of us could live. How would you like to be the one who gets picked for death? If it were someone whom you loved, would you feel: "Whew, I'm glad it wasn't me!"

Is it possible that God who renders the verdict to kill one to save the multitude is the same God who commands to "love one another as I have loved you"? Two different texts stand for two

different principles in the same Gospel. How shall the believers reconcile two different texts in the same Gospel as the will of one and the same God?

Such a principle also contradicts the parable of the lost sheep. A man leaves the flock of 99 sheep on the mountainside to fend for itself, in order to go and to find a lost sheep (Mt. 18:12). In the parable, the welfare of the lost sheep is actively preserved, and not sacrificed for the benefit of the flock of 99 sheep. An individual is not sacrificed for the benefit of the multitude.

**T**here are many things believers could use in the Scriptures, in order to apply to different challenges of life. If sacrificing an individual for the benefit of the multitude is accepted as a biblical principle, one may apply it to the modern day context of life. For example, it would justify the state to violate the human rights, to imprison, to torture, or to kill one individual,

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when the state has the good excuse of saving the nation. Is it well within God's will, and well within the Christian ethical practice, to sacrifice the minority for the benefit of the majority? Is it an acceptable practice to sacrifice the human rights of the individuals or the minority under the pretext of God's will, the biblical teachings, or the national security?

**O**ne may argue that religion should not be political, but the scripture itself proves they are not easily separable. If we recall what the council of the high priests and the Pharisees was debating in John 11:

Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.

That is politics mixed with religion and military campaign, and is exactly the same rhetoric that we have been hearing in the past few years: the terrorists are trying to destroy our way of life and our national security. The high priests and the Pharisees

believed that Jesus was a threat to their way of life and their national security. So the question is: what keeps an individual safe from those who hold power, who invoke the grand principle of the way of life and the national security? Who would dare speak for the individual and defend him from the determined national leaders who seek his life?

**H**ow shall we respond to the prophets of doom who prophesied that unless we torture the terror suspects, and squeeze out the vital intelligence, the terrorists will come again and destroy both our holy place and our nation? Would it fall well under God's will that it is expedient to sacrifice the suspected individuals, so that the whole nation does not perish?

Is that rhetoric such a compelling one that there is no room for error, when it comes to dealing with terror suspects? Who speaks for the terror suspects nowadays? Is it a right thing to question, in a time like this, those

who apply enhanced interrogation techniques on those suspects, in order to preserve our way of life and our national security?

If we believe that God is on our side, and that the greater cause of preserving our way of life and the national security overshadows torturing of the terror suspects, then, the terrorists could appeal to the exactly the same reasoning to justify their terrorist activities. They believe their God is on their side, of course, and they would feel justified to inflict damage upon the infidels who threaten their way of life and their national security. Soon it would turn out to be the case of our-God's-will verses their-God's-will.

**W**hen we sow the seeds of bitter fruit, the bitter fruit is what we reap. We need to realize how our action is perceived by others. The force of violence can destroy bodies and buildings, but cannot destroy the spirit, and it only fortifies the ground on which the

extreme ideologies stand. That is why it is so hard to bring peace in the region where violence and religion play together.

Everyone knows the Golden Rule of Jesus:

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets (Mt. 7:12).

The Golden Rule of Jesus tries to negate the cycle of violence and revenge that lives on this principle: do unto others what they have done to us, and some more.

**A**ll this talk of saving American lives, preserving the American way of life, and protecting the national security seem to scare Christians into believing that it is all God's will, and that it overrides all other considerations.

If it is God's will, then why would God care only about American lives, and ignore the plight of others' lives, others' way of lives, and others' own

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national security? Since when has God been carrying the U.S. passport exclusively? There is hardly anything more destructive than the marriage of nationalism and God's will: it eventually morphs into a theocratic fascism.

God never participates in the illegal detention or the torture of the terror suspects. The action may appear justifiable, but it is ultimately the human action, and they are not the divine action. The God of Jesus condemns such ways of treating people, as God did the Inquisition, Witch Hunt, and the collusion of both German Protestant and Catholic Churches with Nazis.

**T**o be sure, we have our right to protect ourselves against the terrorist attacks. But we do not have the right to sacrifice others against their will, so that we may benefit from their sacrifice and suffering. God rejects such mentality and practice.

Then one may ask, what are we supposed to do? Let them walk, and wait until they return to kick

us in the teeth again? I am pretty sure there are many ways that the experts could use, besides torture and illegal detention. But for the Christian disciples, it is good to start with what Jesus taught.

If we stick with Jesus' principles, we might be able to find ways far better than killing and sacrificing others, far better than merely responding to the violence with shock and awe of superior military force. We could find ways that reach into the root causes of the violence, into the injured souls of others. It will take the true political will to solve the root causes of violence in the Middle East. The terrorism is but one manifestation of the troubles we have in the Middle East. No one becomes a terrorist, because one got bored, or because one hates freedom. People become terrorists, because their ideological perspective allows them no other option.

**T**he incarnate God Jesus came to us, so that there would be less confusion about fathoming God's

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will. Jesus taught us in the plain human words what God's will is. Yet the believers are still confused. God has asked Jesus: "My Son, will you sacrifice your life for my children, for the humanity, for my creation?" And Jesus said:

"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt (Mt. 26:39)."

Jesus voluntarily accepted what God asked him. And Jesus voluntarily laid down his life for his friends.

**I**n his most trying hour, Jesus chose God's will over his own will. How did Jesus discern what was, and what was not, God's will? Here is the scripture verse that sheds light on the critical difference between what people believe is God's will and what is actually God's will:

<sup>13</sup> Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

The sacrifice Jesus talks about is a *voluntary* sacrifice—a self-sacrifice. Jesus laid down his life voluntarily. The sacrifice Caiaphas talked about was a *compulsory* sacrifice—sacrificing others against their will. God would not have needed Caiaphas to prophesy such a thing. Any criminal could see the benefit of killing one person before he becomes a greater trouble.

Those who understand God's will tend to volunteer to sacrifice their own lives for the benefit of others. Those who feign to understand God's will tend to volunteer, or manipulate, others, instead, to sacrifice for them.

**W**e also need to know what God's will is in our own historical context. What is the key that helps us discern what is, and what is not, God's will?

It has always been the way of the human majority to trample the human minority. When the majority forces individuals, or the power minority, to sacrifice

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for the benefit of the majority—  
be it for the way of life, or for the  
national security, it is always the  
work of the human will.

In that human situation, God  
always chooses to be on the side  
of the minority, because no one  
else would stand with the losing  
or weak side. Jesus taught that  
God would go after one lost  
sheep. Jesus proclaimed that  
God sent him to call not the  
righteous, but the sinners to  
repentance.

God is on the side of those who  
are lost, exploited, marginalized,  
and condemned. God wants to  
give a chance to those whose  
hopes had been taken away. We  
must make sure that we are on  
God's side, before we proclaim  
God is on our side. We had  
better pay attention to the plight  
of the individuals whom we plan  
to sacrifice in God's name, or in  
any other names, because those  
are the ones for whom God will  
speak. We must make sure our  
action is righteous in God's sight,  
before we expect God to take our  
side.

**I**f God ever wanted anyone to  
sacrifice one's own life, it was  
presented as a choice, not under  
the duress. Contrary to the  
popular belief, God never  
coerced the humanity to sacrifice  
an individual, in order to benefit  
a people. That is exactly the  
point Jesus made with the  
parable of the lost sheep: God  
would go after the lost one,  
because no one else would.  
When God calls an individual to  
self-sacrifice, the calling always  
comes in the form of a free  
choice: we can either accept it, or  
decline it.

God took the form of the human,  
and appeared before us. We  
know him as Jesus, the Incarnate  
God. God became the flesh, so  
that the flesh would know God.  
And this is God's will:

Love one another, as I have loved  
you.