

# The D-Files

## Reports from Durant, Oklahoma

### Report #8a: Anger and Grief

Can you be angry at someone and share their grief at the same time? The recent shooting at the Westside Baptist Church in Fort Worth and the aftermath causes me to ponder that question. First, a step back.

Only this past week did I hear of the Southern Baptist Convention's plan to evangelize among Jews during the high holy days of Yom Kippur. I had mixed emotions. Not being a religious person, I try not to pick sides in sectarian religious scuffles. However, I must admit that I did find it a bit offensive to see one religion overtly going on the offensive against another. Essentially it came down to "Our God is better than your god and you'd better come over to our side of the street else y'all will surely rot in hell for eternity."

While I do not believe in a God (of either the personal or impersonal variety), gods in general or the supernatural, I do strongly believe that people should—and do—have the right to believe what they want. I sincerely believe in the Constitution's guarantees of religious freedom. I have no right to force anyone else to believe in any particular religion or to stop believing. We may all attempt to persuade others to the rightness of our cause in the marketplace of ideas, but neither the populace nor the government should ever coerce belief or non-belief. In this light, the Baptists are well within their rights to attempt to persuade any Jew who cares to listen of the benefits of a belief in Jesus Christ as his or her saviour.

There is also a certain chronological and historical logic to a Christian trying to convert a Jew. After all, Christ and the Apostles were Jews. Christianity grew out of the Jewish tradition much as Eve grew from Adam's rib. Ideally, one would think, all Jews would become Christians. I'm sure this is part of the thinking of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). But now it's time for a poser.

How would the SBC react if evangelical Muslims chose Easter as the time to evangelize amongst Christians in order to show them the error of their ways? After all, Islam is also an outgrowth of both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Muslims recognize both Christians and Jews as "people of the book" (i.e. the Bible). In addition, they revere all of the prophets of the Bible from Adam and Noah right up to Jesus (peace be upon them). Of course the catch is that Jesus (PBUH) was "just" a prophet but he certainly was not the divine Son of God. The FINAL prophet, Muhammad (PBUH), made all this abundantly clear in his teachings which were revealed to him by God (Allah) and written down contemporaneously, unlike the books of the New Testament. So how would the SBC react?

I would bet money that this would not be seen as an act of Muslim charity to save the souls of millions of misguided Christians. Rather, it would be seen as a direct attack upon the very foundation of Christianity itself. Of course it WOULD be just such an attack. However, using the same logic as the Southern Baptists, the Muslims would be doing this for only the best of reasons; to save the souls of all of those poor misguided Christians. Obviously I am only speculating with this specific example. On the other hand, I need only look at last week's Durant Daily Democrat to see that this fear of "foreign religions" is not a figment of my arguably twisted imagination.

Last week (9 September, 1999) the Red River Arts Council was sponsoring a performance of sacred songs and dance by a group of Tibetan Monks. The performance was to be held on the campus of Southeastern Oklahoma State University. The Durant School Board originally allowed public school students the option to attend

(with their parent's consent of course), as a school-sponsored event. So far this represents nothing unusual. "School sponsorship" is regularly granted to events sponsored by the Arts Council.

Later, several parents complained to the school board, which then reversed its decision, revoking the school sponsored status. Two days prior to the performance, Pastor Doug Lott of the River of Life Christian Fellowship made the following statement at the Durant Ministerial Alliance: "This is not simply a cultural expose but a religious rite, and it promotes the idea that a Tibetan god carries some kind of power our God doesn't have, some kind of subliminal message. Having traveled the world, I appreciate other cultures, but I think we're crossing a fine line here and promoting Eastern mysticism." (By the way, these messages encouraging conversion to Buddhism directed at the children would have to be subliminal. None of the monks speaks English.)

A number of evangelical Christian groups have long been decrying the actions of the Communist Chinese government in cracking down on Christians trying to spread the good word within China. This very same government has also been openly attacking Buddhist monks even prior to the Chinese invasion of Tibet decades ago. I would think that these monks and Evangelical Christians would have a great deal in common and a common enemy as well.

But instead of welcoming a small group of men who are exiled from their country for their religious beliefs (a country that also persecutes Christians) and enjoy sharing in their culture - instead, the locals rally to make sure their children's minds are not polluted by subliminal messages from these foreign religious weirdos. It is in this context that I find the SBC's attempt to convert Jews suspect. And then a nut walks into Westwood Baptist Church and kills seven people and then himself.

Suddenly the very same people I was feeling anger toward I now feel grief for. But it gets worse; I'm an atheist and while this atheist was watching the news and feeling disgust and grief I was also being told by understandably distraught people that atheism is why this man did what he did: He didn't have Jesus. I am informed that we need more prayer and more religion and that taking religion out of school and government is what is wrong with this country. Sub-text: People who don't have Jesus are bad people. Ergo, I am a bad person. The grief is now mixing with some tinges of anger again. Anger and frustration.

Unfortunately, this where I remain. Angry, frustrated and grieving. I am angry at the Southern Baptists for being unable to let other folks believe as they wish - or not believe at all. I am angry with the poor troubled bastard that felt that he had no other option than to take seven people with him as he exited this world. I am frustrated with a large part of, but not all of, the world of religion. Almost every religion preaches peace, love and brotherhood but that is usually reserved for "us" and not "them." And so the battles rage: Jew vs. Muslims in the Middle-East, Catholics vs. Protestants in Northern Ireland, Muslims vs. Christians in Kosovo and Bosnia, Muslims vs. Hindus in India and Pakistan, Hindus vs. Sikhs in India, and on and on and on.

Finally, I am grieving. Baptists or not, those were my countrymen who were killed in Fort Worth. Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Jew or not, those are still all of our brothers and sisters dying in India, East Timor, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Ireland and on and on and on. All dying because they practice the wrong religion or were raised in the wrong culture. Of all the places on the planet, wouldn't you think that we in the United States could leave people alone with their religion?

We should all be frustrated and angry at this. But instead of getting even or converting others to the one true God why don't we all just treat each other in a civil manner? Like Pastor Doug Lott, I too have traveled the world and met many people. In those travels I have learned one great fact: We all have so much more in common than we have differences. Unfortunately, we tend to view others like newspapers and the TV cover news; the common threads and the ordinary are not news, only the points of contention. So why don't we all find the common ground and follow the golden rule. Let's make that our new year's resolution every year.