



COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

This past month, the White House held a summit on "Countering Violent Extremism." The shrillest of President Obama's political opponents found fault with everything about it. And in doing so revealed both their failure to grasp reality and their own irresponsible wish to subordinate their own (religious) ideology to the safety of our nation and peace in the world. This is not to say that people can't have legitimate differences with the current occupant of the White House. But in this case they don't appear to be well-considered.

Days before the conference, a firestorm of protest and ridicule was occasioned by the remarks of State Department spokesperson Marie Harf on Chris Matthews' MSNBC'S Hardball program:

Harf: "We're killing a lot of them and we're going to keep killing more of them. So are the Egyptians, so are the Jordanians. They're in this fight with us. But we cannot win this war by killing them. We cannot kill our way out of this war. We need in the medium to longer term to go after the root causes that leads people to join these groups, whether it's lack of opportunity for jobs -" Matthews [interrupting]: "We're not going to be able to stop that in our lifetime, or 50 lifetimes! There's always going to be poor people. There's always going to be poor Muslims."

Sean Hannity's response was typical:

"So I guess, maybe, if we just try and get every terrorist a job and provide a better way of life, maybe we should put them on our food stamp program ... We'll just tax the American people to pay for it. ... now that has to take the lead ... for the dumbest statement I've ever heard, ... One of the most ignorant and misguided of the entire Obama presidency"

But no one ridiculed President George W. Bush when he said at the UN in 2002:

"We will challenge the poverty and hopelessness and lack of education and failed governments that too often allow conditions that terrorists can seize and try to turn to their advantage."

Three years later, also before the UN, President Bush elaborated further:

"... we know that this war will not be won by force of arms alone. ... We must change the conditions that allow terrorists to flourish and recruit by spreading the hope of freedom ... We must defend and extend a vision of human dignity and opportunity and prosperity, ... the United States is determined to help nations that are struggling with poverty."

No one seems to have objected to that. Nor was Mitt Romney ridiculed in 2012 when, in the third Presidential Debate, he said:

"... we can't kill our way out of this mess. We're going to have to put in place a very comprehensive and robust strategy to help the world of Islam and other parts of the world reject this radical violent extremism."

The fact is that violent extremism is fueled in large part by oppressive and adverse social and political conditions. For various reasons this is not much talked about, which is surprising given that in other contexts people like Hannity seem to understand that the recognition and protection of personal freedoms and an effective and impartial rule of law are necessary ingredients for economic prosperity. Even Chris Matthews should know that the problem is not that there will always be poor Muslims. When Harf pointed out the importance of the question of: "What makes these 17-year-old kids pick up an AK-47 instead of trying to start a business?" Matthews dismissed it as comparable to "juvenile delinquency" in the US. Really??

Perhaps the right "sound bite" has not yet been found. But just look at the rankings of the world's nations in terms of political rights and civil liberties. Freedom House has been tracking this for many years. The interactive map on their website, freedomhouse.org, dramatically shows that violent extremism thrives in places where freedom is most limited. So the answer to Harf's question, in part, is that when it is not possible to start a business - or any business one might start is likely to be blown up - people pick up guns to try to solve their problems. (related info at <http://www.arabstates.undp.org>)

President Obama and his administration have also been pilloried for leaving out the connection to Islam, just as President Bush came under attack for

referring to Islam as “the religion of peace.” But this is not “political correctness.” This is a refusal to fight a war on the enemies’ terms. For, certainly, groups like Al Qaeda and now ISIL insist and would like it to be believed that they represent “true Islam.” This is to their advantage after all. It always is when a tiny minority claims to be the whole, just as when the religious political extremists in the US assert that they are the “true Christians.” The violent extremists would like to get all of the world’s billion-plus Muslims on their side. That should not be encouraged.

Why would anyone in favor of peace and freedom want to play into that? Sadly, it may be because even people who should know better are susceptible to the game of identifying some people as “the other” who must be regarded with suspicion and fear. And what better target is there but people of another religion? Some Christians, especially, may welcome the idea of a war against Islam. But they should not be allowed to have their way in this just as they should not be allowed to have their way in other things.

Countering Violent Extremism must include depriving it of its ideological support. This means, in part, not treating it as if it had any ideological support. Murder and mayhem is wrong regardless of whether its perpetrators justify it on religious grounds. It took many centuries for most Christians to figure this out. Many Muslims appear to know it as well. The principle with which to oppose violent extremism is that anything that claims to justify it is not religion. Meanwhile, political rights and civil liberties must be vigorously pressed for wherever they are denied to people. Globalization is driving home the truth that Martin Luther King Jr. declared, that: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

What does all of this have to do with Freethought? Why is this being said in a church bulletin? Because freedom is at the heart of Freethought. And if religion generally is to remain a potent force in the world – and despite the fondest wishes of some unbelievers it appears this is a certainty – then religion must come to be understood widely, as so many now do, as a matter of individual opinion and private practice only. Religion is the process and product of the effort to make sense of one’s subjective experience of the human condition. It is not a license to kill, not for violent extremists or for anyone else either.

**YOUR GENEROUS
DONATIONS TO THE NTCOF
ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**

**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:
- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason’s Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club: To Be Announced!

Communitas Dinner Groups: To Be Announced!

Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“EASTER”
(yes, it’s the name of a deity,
but a pagan one)
>> Sunday, April 5th, 2015 <<
>2nd time at our NEW LOCATION<
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(about 1/2 mile west of the Sheraton on 114
- take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the
frontage road east just past Best Western)**



The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Pastor (It’s a Job Description, NOT a title!)	Tim Gorski
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Welcome Coordinator	Mark Barnick
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