

"In God's Name" Discussion Guide

PREFACE:

Twelve of "the world's most influential religious leaders" were featured in a prime time two-hour television special event on CBS December 23, 2007 -- "In God's Name." Produced by Jules and Gedeon Naudet, the diverse and powerful voices offer provocative, compelling and enlightening perspectives on myriad issues in our post-9/11 world, including the rise of terrorism, fanaticism, intolerance and war.

The 12 leaders featured in this special, in alphabetical order, are:

Alexei II, Patriarch of Moscow and head of the Russian Orthodox Church
Amma (Mata Amritanandamayi), a Hindu spiritual leader
Pope Benedict XVI, head of the Roman Catholic Church
The Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists
Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a prominent Shi'ite Muslim leader
Bishop Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
and president of the Lutheran World Federation
Michihisa Kitashirakawa, jingu daiguji (high priest) of the Shinto Grand Shrine of Ise
Yona Metzger, Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel
Dr. Frank Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention
Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, sheikh of Al-Azhar and a prominent Sunni Muslim leader
Joginder Singh Vedanti, jathedar of the Akal Takht, the Sikhs' highest authority
Dr. Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury and head of the Church of England

This discussion guide is designed to facilitate four group sessions, and is available here for free download; the DVD of the program will be available in commercial bookstores and other DVD outlets.

PART 1 INTRODUCTION:

"In the name of God we kill other people," states presiding bishop Mark Hanson. Pope Benedict XVI comments that "man has always been the same ... it is there in the depths of his being, in his heart, where man always needs to be saved."

Sheik Tantawi, a Shi'ite Muslim, says, "People of all faiths and of all homelands are divided into reasonable and unreasonable people, and all that I wish and pray to God for is that reasonable people would outnumber the fools."

The Dalai Lama states, "We can't decree that this or that religion is the most important," just as we can't say which kind of "spicy" food is best.

- 1, Reflect on Bishop Hanson's opening statement. What historical examples can you think of from various faith traditions?**

- 2, **What do you make of your own faith in light of the many religions and people that co-exist together on the planet?**
- 3, **When you look at conflicts taking place in the world, why do you believe we use religion to justify violence? Do we need to seek reconciliation to these conflicts in our hearts and in the world? Why, or why not?**
4. **What are the implications of the Dalai Lama's statement for Christians hoping to know and to live well with neighbors of other faiths?**

After 9/11 many of us felt "confronted by death." Confrontations with death, and particularly violent death, draw from us fundamental questions -- "Where was God that day?" The question lands in the context of our lives. On "that day" God seemed either to be present or to vanish.

5. **How do you answer for yourself and for others the question of God's presence or absence at times of tragedy?**

FIRST LIGHT:

"Why is it that some people are suffering and some people are happy?" asks Amma, the Hindu spiritual leader.

6. **What is your response to the justice and mercy of God, given human suffering in the world?**

Patriarch Alexei, Russian Orthodox leader, remarks how he was formed by his parents "in my education and upbringing, and in belonging to the church, and in that deep faith that they strengthened in my heart." Religious leaders generally speak of their faith formation in terms of "journey, an accompanying yes to life, in protest against injustice, a voice of urgency, and laughter."

7. **When you think of your own faith formation, or your calling into the world, what terms would you use and why?**

EARLY MORNING THE PRESENCE OF GOD:

"Who is God?" The religious leaders in the film see God "in the sun that rises and the moon that glows," or in "God's voice ... speaking through others -- friends, parents, pastors, priests," or in terms of "personal relationship," or where one has the "feeling of the presence of God in a manner that is more powerful than a feeling of my own self," or "an awareness of the presence of God" as an awareness of one's own breath that sustains with both voice and silence.

8. **How do you experience God and answer the question of "Who is God?"**
9. **What words and phrases do you use to qualify your experience of God?**

PART 2

THE SACRIFICES MADE:

"I am a child of God, but God has called me to many vocations," says presiding bishop Mark Hanson.

- 10. What is a vocation? How is this different from a career?**
- 11. How many vocations do you have (as a spouse, friend, lover, parent, worker, volunteer ...)?**
- 12. How are the vocational complexities of one human life like many distinct religions in one world?**

"The rough and difficult times are what bring people together and strengthen their faith." Alexei II, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch stated this point succinctly: "Unless there is thunder people don't make the sign of the cross."

- 13. Is your faith stronger during difficult times?**
- 14. Do we somehow appear to need God more when we feel sorrow and pain?**
- 15. What is the nature of a relationship when it is defined solely by sorrow and pain?**

LATE MORNING

DOUBTING GOD:

"Love is also always a renunciation of self ... those who lose themselves are saved," says Benedict XVI. The Dalai Lama says that "love and compassion" are central to life where "we are the same."

- 16. How does love between human beings assist us in reaching "a new place" or "sanctuary" where we feel safe with one another?**
- 17. What do we do as human beings when we feel like refugees in our human relationships?**
- 18. How do you describe the fundamental qualities of loving relationships?**

Archbishop Rowan Williams says, "When you see events of great cruelty and great horror in the world ... then you ask, 'how does it connect?' ... I think I'm sure of God, but I'm also sure of the suffering. ... How do I see out of both eyes at once?"

- 19. Are you a "passionate doubter?" How do your doubts inform your faith?**

MIDDAY:

The Rev. Frank Page states, "The vast majority of ... evangelicals that I know are loving, caring people who will do anything they can to help other people. ... There is a common link in all religion. That

common link is humanity's desire to touch the divine. ... "The Scripture's very clear that the role of religion is to bring people to God."

- 20. When we enter a relationship with God, is it like climbing a mountain or receiving a gift, inviting God in our hearts or recognizing God's claim on us?**

SAINTS AND SINNERS:

Some of these leaders state that we are "saint and sinner," "inherently good or destructive," "conflicted between good and evil."

- 21. Given our own conflicted natures, how do we take broad truths like "do not kill" or "do not commit murder" and make these concrete in every day life, in our local communities, and between nations?**

PART 3

EARLY AFTERNOON:

FINDING FAITH:

Imam Tantawi: "Belief means embracing a sound faith represented in worshiping God faithfully and sincerely, and believing in the messengers of God -- his books and his angels." "My position ... is that I cannot muzzle people. Those who are erroneous in their rulings or Fatwas, behavior or words, it is my job to correct them and show them right and wrong, what is good and what is bad."

Rabbi Yona Metzger: I think everyone in the world looks for faith. The majority of the world believes in one God in the sky.

- 22. What does having faith mean to you?**
- 23. How did you come to your understanding of your own faith?**

FAITH AND FURY:

"There is no innate terrorism in men." ... "There are about 6 billion people in the world, and among them only a few thousand believe in terrorism." The Dalai Lama suggests that authentic expressions of the sacred texts and religions do not exploit terrorist behavior. Terrorism, committing suicide, pages of history's wars reveal "both sides invoking the name of God."

- 24. How shall we understand pre-emptive attack for the purposes of self-defense, where sometimes it is "necessary at times to shoot and kill" or "resort to violence" as a reaction "in the defense of nation and life"?**
- 25. In what ways are pre-emptive strategies between nation states different from pre-emptive self-defense of individuals?**

"Terrorism is in the minority." Nevertheless, terrorist elements are evident in all religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism.

- 26. In recent years, in what ways has our emphasis on terrorism and terrorists constructed a barrier of fear toward other human beings? How does this fear keep us from addressing other serious concerns in the world, or from caring for widows, orphans, the hungry, the impoverished and the poor in spirit?**
- 27. If through fear we stigmatize other human beings or religions as "terrorists," in what ways have we missed opportunities to understand and become aware of the other in our midst?**
- 28. In these statements from various religious traditions, what do you hear that is implicit about human nature, and the human capacity to do and be good?**
- 29. What do each of these traditions and perspectives suggest about how God reaches and saves us?**

Bishop Hanson: "But terrorism isn't the only reality in life. I remember once when I went to the United Nations. Terrorism wasn't the primary reality. It was the reality of hunger. It was the reality of HIV and AIDS. It was the reality of malnutrition and death from diseases that we know how to heal. So I'm a little concerned that the world is so preoccupied with terrorism that we are turning our back on other realities that frankly are killing many more people each day than are terrorists.

- 30. What should be the priorities for you as an individual? For your community? For your church? For your nation?**

TESTING FAITH:

"Caught in the crossfire" of war are our holy sites, innocent victims through death and debilitation and tragedies. Faith that is tested is where we "long to touch our foreheads to the earth" or to pray "at the feet of God."

- 31. Do you ever stand before God as judge and say, "I am too broken, can you assist me to get the help that I cannot give myself?"**
- 32. In moments of testing, what are the signs we see of "God binding God's self" to us and deepening our recognition and love?**
- 33. In moments of being tested, are our faiths made stronger?**

PART 4

LATE AFTERNOON:

Michihisa Kitashirakawa says: "I think we respect the way nature replaces itself. ... Shinto has a concept of eternal youth; therefore, gods and goddesses are reborn every twenty years ... There are gods and goddesses existing in everything. Everything can be a god or goddess. ... Even one drop of water (or even one leaf) circulates without any waste. Seasons come around, and they will come one after another in unbroken succession forever.

According to the producer, "The high priest told us that the shinto shrines are rebuilt every 20 years. Like the gods themselves, the temples never get old."

- 34. How do Christians view the presence of God in the created world? Does your concept of God's presence affect how you treat God's creation?**

TWILIGHT:

Dalai Lama: "Fruits fall down when ripened, there is nothing to get surprised in that. So what is important is if you have spent a good life."

Imam Tantawi: "I feel the presence of God Almighty in a manner that is more powerful than my feeling of my own self."

Dr. Frank Page: "When you read in the newspaper that Frank Page has died, don't believe it because at that moment when you have read that, I will be more alive than I have ever been in my entire existence because I'll be in the presence of God."

- 35. Will all believers from all religions be in the presence of God after death?**

THE MEANING OF LIFE:

Many of these religious leaders aspire to the fundamental ethics of reciprocity, so that as Amma says: "The meaning of life is to love others as we love ourselves, and to serve others."

Archbishop Williams remarks, "The meaning comes as you look around and see all of these very human faces. And you think each one of us is capable of reflecting God's glory, and that changes how you relate to everybody. The most important thing I would like to teach my children is to know that they are loved, to know that they are immeasurably precious, to give them some small sense of how precious they are to God."

Ayatollah Fadlallah: "I wish their future would be a future characterized by reason and logic, not instinct, and the belief in the value of dialogue and debate.

- 36. What do you believe is the meaning of life? What are you here on earth to do, what is your purpose in life, and how do you fulfill these things with others?**

We require one another for a peaceful planet. Archbishop Williams states that "Most of us don't understand how quickly it could all fall away." We must "wake up to how very quickly this could all disappear."

Patriarch Alexy II: "We'll get what we deserve. Our earthly life is given to us to prepare ourselves for the life to come. And all that we pay so much attention to -- the external -- that will remain here.

37. What can we as Lutherans agree with in this statement? Disagree with?

Rabbi Yona Metzger: "I sat once with a Muslim leader, and he told me, 'look I don't know if our meeting will bring peace, but what is clear to me is that after we sit together with a cup of coffee and you tell me your problems ... In the context of such a discussion it will be difficult to hate you later.'"

Alexy II: "In Moscow we conducted an international summit of religious activists: everyone stood as one to condemn terrorist acts, to condemn violence, to condemn mutual hatred. That is the power of religion."

Pope Benedict: "In the face of a world torn apart by conflicts, where violence in God's name is at times justified, it is important to reaffirm that religions can never become vehicles of hatred. It is never possible, invoking God's name, to succeed in justifying evil and violence.

38. How can you help your local community understand that "religions can never be vehicles of hatred"?

Searching for meaning is about living into the question. The directors of "In God's Name" comment that: "We got answers, maybe not always the ones we were looking for. But the search for truth is in itself a religious act."

39. How does God answer our questions often in ways we never anticipate? How is there something about the search for truth that is in itself a spiritual, holy, or religious act?

A PRAYER FOR HUMANKIND:

Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, at the end of the film, states that our human "dignity [must not be] stripped from us by prejudice, by poverty, by war, by violence. I don't think that the way we are living today is what God intended for us. ... I think one of the greatest challenges today is the relationship between unity and diversity. ... We share two things -- a common humanity and a common earth."

Imam Tantawi: "In these days of grave and serious happenings, especially in Iraq, we pray to God Almighty to extinguish all seditions. We have always said that there is no difference between a Sunni Muslim and a Shi'ite Muslim; all Muslims should be loving brethren."

40. How should we live today in ways that God intend for us?

41. How can you assist your own community to find ways of addressing our greatest challenges while enhancing our call to a common humanity and a common earth?

Other resources:

"Windows for Understanding: Jewish-Muslim-Lutheran Relations", ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, downloadable from:
<http://archive.elca.org/ecumenical/interreligious/windows.html>.

"In God's Name: Wisdom From the World's Great Spiritual Leaders" by Jules Naudet and Gedeon Naudet, with photographs by Stephan Crasneanski, available at bookstores everywhere.

"Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith" by Robert Buckley Farlee (general editor), Augsburg Fortress Publishers, \$9.99. ISBN 9780806638461.

"The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions" by Huston Smith, Harper Collins, \$16.95. ISBN: 9780062508119; ISBN10: 0062508113.



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