

When Religion Becomes Evil

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Sometime after my daughter, Elizabeth, had already left for college, I was permitted to “find” a copy of the essay she had written for her application process. It was about a painful personal experience through which she had suffered in her early years in high school.

One of Elizabeth’s good friends, we’ll call her Mary, took her family’s Protestant religion very seriously. In fact, her father was a minister. Mary knew that Elizabeth did not attend church, and in fact did not have any specific or particular religious beliefs (of a known or familiar variety) and she therefore felt it her duty to inform Elizabeth that, as non Christians, we were all going to Hell. You can imagine how Elizabeth felt, sensing that her father and I did not really seem worried about that possibility, but not knowing enough to be able to hold her own in a conversation dominated by the “absolute facts” as Mary knew them, the truth and the only truth according to her church and its teachings.

Obviously, Mary is not the evil one in this story. But in my opinion the divisive and hurtful teachings of her religion are. We are right, you are wrong. We’ll be saved, you will go to Hell. What happened to the inclusive words of Jesus who spoke so passionately about the importance of love and compassion?

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journal contains this entry: “It has been a fortnight since I attended a meeting of the Bible Society. The treasurer of this institution is also Marshal of the district, and by a somewhat unfortunate arrangement had appointed a special meeting of the [Bible] Society, and a slave-auction, at the same time and place, one being in the Government house and the other in the adjoining yard. One ear therefore heard the glad tidings of great joy, whilst the other was regaled with ‘Going, gentlemen, going!’ And almost without changing our position we might aid in sending the Scriptures into Africa, or bid for ‘four children with the mother’ who had [recently] been kidnapped therefrom.” (Harvard Square Commentary, 18 July 2004)

How could something so potentially good (and there has been much good that has come out of the Christian faith and community) also have the capacity to legitimize the Crusades, justify slavery, and support 2000 years of the systematic oppression of women? Many different “religious ideologies and commitments are indisputably central factors in the escalation of violence and evil around the world. The evidence is readily available in the headlines of our daily newspapers: ‘Hindus and Muslims on the Brink of War in Kashmir,’ ‘Palestinians Killed by Jewish Settlers in the occupied Territories,’ ‘Murder Trial Begins for Fundamentalist Christian Minister in Abortion Doctor Case.’” (Kimball, introduction) But in an effort not to single out any specific religions, the bigger question we need to ask ourselves is: How can any religion, meant to help human beings, ever become something less than good.

This is not an easy question to answer. Let me begin with what I think is an important basic assumption. Let us agree to assume that religion itself is a good thing. As a minister I want to make very clear that I believe this sincerely. Religion is a good thing. I make the distinction, however, between religious thinking and specific religions. For me, religious thinking comes from

our need, as sentient beings, to understand our place within the nature of reality. It follows, then, that religions are specific interpretations of those understandings and the accompanying rituals designed to express them.

This impulse for religious thinking seems to be built into the human psyche. You may have heard about current studies in the neurosciences by Andrew Newberg that hypothesize that our brains are hard wired for mystical experiences, hardwired to recognize the infinite connectivity of everything when we put ourselves into a receptive state as in meditation or prayer. Religion, according to Donald Crosby, is a “human phenomenon first, and only secondarily a culturally indigenous one.” (Donald Crosby, “Interpretive Theories of Religion” 1981, p. 26-27) A recent article by Paul Bloom posits that “human beings come into the world with a predisposition to believe in supernatural phenomena, and this predisposition is an incidental by-product of cognitive functioning gone awry,” leading him to question “Is God An Accident?” The evidence would support an assumption that there is no such thing as a non-religious person, although they may indeed be non-churched.

You may have begun to notice that I am fascinated by the study of religion. It is, to be sure, a relatively new area within scholarly thought, since until pretty recently it was considered off limits to subject something so holy as religion to any kind of “study” or criticism. There is something unique within the very nature of religion itself that complicates its subjection to academic study. How can you empirically study something that goes beyond our ability to measure and detect? How can you rationally think about something that is in itself just a perception of what we think is rational? The study of religion can be so personal and so tied to our ultimate identity that most have hesitated to make the venture.

I think the time has come, however, when we no longer have the luxury of ignorance – or maybe the word is passivity. “Although many of us have been taught it is not polite to discuss religion and politics in public we must quickly unlearn that lesson,” writes Charles Kimball. Given our world and its religiously based strife, given our shrinking world and our increasing exposure to its religious diversity, given our new scientific understandings of the nature of the universe and human consciousness, the time has come when we need to examine this thing called religion. Religion is necessary and can be very good. It can also do harm and has obviously done so, over and over, for thousands of years, mostly unexamined and unchecked. We are finally in an era (and a country, I might add) where religious criticism is even a possibility. It will still require bravery and probably thick skin, but I truly believe it is time to begin making value judgements about religions because not everything should be acceptable as religion.

In his book, When Religion Becomes Evil, Charles Kimball first asks “Is religion itself the problem?” His answer is both “yes...and no.” “In their origins and their core teachings,” he writes, “religions may be noble, but how they develop almost invariably falls short of the ideal.” Most of our major world religions began with the insightful teachings of one person, who sought to bring needed correctives or reforms or deeper insights into existing traditions. Quite often these teachers spoke of very mystical understandings of the oneness and relatedness of all existence. But it seems to have been the natural tendency for these new traditions, as they sought to establish their identity and flourish amidst criticism and threats, to formalize themselves into something that acted more to exclude than to include.

A Buddhist story goes: “One day Mara, the Buddhist God of ignorance and evil, was traveling through the villages of India with his attendants. He saw a man doing walking meditation whose face was lit up with wonder. The man had just discovered something on the ground in front of him. Mara’s attendants asked what that was and Mara replied ‘A piece of truth.’ ‘Doesn’t that bother you when someone finds a piece of the truth, O evil one?’ his attendants asked. ‘No,’ Mara replied. ‘Right after this they usually make a belief out of it.’” (Soul Food, p. 227)

Charles Kimball, in “When Religion Becomes Evil,” posits five warning signs of the human corruption of religion. “When one finds one or more of these dynamics at work, history suggests that serious trouble lurks just ahead.” (p. 6) These are Kimball’s five warning signs with some selected quotations from the book.

1. Making absolute truth claims – “while truth claims are the essential ingredients of religion, they are also the points at which divergent interpretations arise. When particular understandings become rigidly fixed and uncritically appropriated as absolute truths, well-meaning people can and often do paint themselves into a corner from which they must assume a defensive or even offensive posture.” (p. 46) Rigid truth claims, particularly in times of conflict, are the basis for demonizing and dehumanizing those who differ.” (p. 51-52)
2. Demanding blind obedience – “Religion that requires adherents to disconnect their brain is often a big part of the problem.” (p. 29) “Authentic religion engages the intellect as people wrestle with the mystery of existence and the challenges of living in an imperfect world. Conversely, blind obedience is a sure sign of corrupt religion... When individual believers abdicate personal responsibility and yield to the authority of a charismatic leader or become enslaved to particular ideas or teachings, religion can easily become the framework for violence and destruction.” (p. 72) “The likelihood of religion becoming evil is greatly diminished when there is freedom for individual thinking and when honest inquiry is encouraged.” (p. 99)
3. Establishing an “ideal” time – for example, (and the oversimplified explanation is mine, not Kimball’s) it is difficult to convince some people to work for a sustainable peace in the Middle East because they are religiously influenced to do just the opposite out of their belief that the second coming of Christ will only happen after certain conflagrations in that region of the world happen. “Those who narrowly define ideal temporal structures of the state and determine they are God’s agents to establish a theocracy are dangerous. Beware of people and groups whose political blueprint is based on a mandate from heaven that depends on human beings to implement.” (p. 125) You may be able to place this warning in current context.
4. Letting the end justify any means – “Concern for the well-being of one’s religious community is normal. This positive impulse can turn violently negative, [however], when group identity is defined in ways that dehumanize people outside the community; the other is seen not as a person but as an object posing a threat. Once this dynamic is in place, otherwise unthinkable behavior can be justified as a means to the end of reinforcing and protecting group identity.” (p. 134) “When people are called upon to do violence to their neighbor in the service of a righteous cause, they should know that something is dreadfully wrong. In the end, human beings remain responsible for their actions.” (p. 133)
5. And the final sign is the declaration of holy war – In depicting their wars as holy causes, leaders continue to compound the errors of the past and distort the very heart of the religion they claim to be defending. “Declaring war ‘holy’ is a sure sign of corrupt

religion. In fact, at the center of authentic religion one always finds the promise of peace, both an inner peace for the adherent and a requirement to seek peaceful coexistence with the rest of creation.” (p. 156)

One of the things I like most about this book is that Kimball pays a lot of attention to suggesting solutions, something many critics neglect to do. He continually emphasizes that “at the heart of every major religious tradition we find abiding truths and principles that provide the first antidote to violence and extremism.” He acknowledges that “it is all too easy to lose sight of the most basic teachings in one’s religion, particularly when oppressive social, political, or economic conditions figure prominently” in your life. “Nevertheless,” in his view, “people of faith offer the best hope both for correcting the corruptions leading to violence and for leading the way into a more promising future.” (p. 187)

Our challenge today, according to Kimball, is to seek a unity that celebrates diversity, to learn to live within our religious particularity (our tradition) yet embrace an enthusiastic inclusivity with those whose faith takes different forms. I have often thought that our own Unitarian Universalist tradition could be a living example of that very ideal. We are an association of independent congregations – each in itself a study in theological diversity. You’ll notice, though, that I said “could be..” Unfortunately, even within our ranks I sense, for example, a continuing argument over which is better – humanism or theism, the word church or the word society. I also sometimes feel that we can have, or at least appear to have, an unattractive superior attitude about our liberal faith; that somehow ours is the more intelligent, further evolved perspective toward religious thinking. This internal haggling and condescending attitude will get us nowhere toward living out our potential in the world of religious pluralism. We would do well to remember the words of William Paden from his book, “Interpreting the Sacred:” “Perspectives existing side by side do not necessarily conflict until they start denying each other.” (Paden, p. 126) Diana Eck, another leader in the study and promotion of sustainable religious pluralism, points out that being a pluralist will involve having the courage to encounter other faith traditions while defining one’s own “not by its borders, but by its roots.” (Eck, p. 23)

So what happened to my daughter and her friend, the one who sentenced our family to Hell? They talked about it – kept the lines of communication open – and in the end their mutual affection and some innate wisdom born of the openness and generosity of young hearts prevailed. Mary and her parents were all at Elizabeth’s recent wedding. Theirs is perhaps an example, on the very personal level, of those oft quoted words of Francis David: “We need not think alike to love alike.

There is much important work being done, today, toward a more peaceful way of living in our highly religiously diverse world, not to mention our own country, the most religiously plural nation on earth. As people, here this morning, who feel seriously the call to be peacemakers, how do we deal with evil under the guise of religion? Will it be possible to marshal the positive energies of those very religions in an effort toward world peace?

What can we do personally, and particularly from within our Unitarian Universalist perspective? I would suggest a number of things. We can continue to support interfaith discussions – and organizations such as the Interfaith Alliance. We can make the effort to get to know real people with ideas other than our own, for we all know that when people from different faith traditions get to know one another, they often discover quickly that they have a great deal in common, particularly in terms of what their faith requires in relation to their neighbors. These

conversations will require us to have thought through our own individual theologies, in order that our words might give legitimacy and significance to the liberal religious perspective. We can study, as a faith not threatened by new ideas, the religions of the world, educating ourselves and especially our children about world religions, their beliefs, practices, strengths and weaknesses. We can examine our own liberal perspective and its lack of theological attention to the problem of sin and evil in the world. If we are to make legitimate judgements about what is wrong with our current religious institutions we must first understand them very well.

We must also, in my opinion, take to heart the fact that our religious background and that of the society we live in has more influence on our basic philosophies and ways of behaving than we might realize. As we in the West, including the un-churched, have been unconsciously shaped by the ideologies of Judaism and Christianity, so have the people in other parts of the world been shaped by their predominant religious influences. It is said that one of the failings in our military and political dealings with the Middle East is that of not taking the time or making the effort to understand Islam and the different everyday ways of thinking and behaving it has inspired compared to our own.

Finally, let us remember that to criticize a religion is not to reject it. As Ken Patton, a humanist leader within the UUA of the last century, put it “To criticize is not to reject. This point must be emphasized, for it is the dividing line between the free mind and fanaticism.” Religious thinking is and always will be an essential part of our humanity. But as our understandings of the power and potential for abuse and evil within religion increase, I believe it is our responsibility, for the benefit of our very existence, to inform ourselves, criticize, and help change what needs to change. Unitarian Universalists should join courageous people like author Charles Kimball in speaking out loud what many are afraid to talk about. Religion *can* become evil. The words need to be said.

It will take caring and respect, love and compassion, acknowledgement of the inherent worth and dignity of all, to enable true and peaceful religious pluralism to flourish on earth. If we, as representatives of responsible religious freedom, can help bring about an increased consciousness and involvement in the transformation of our world’s religious strife, even if only within our own communities, what a beautiful thing that would be.

References:

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