

Is Religion Really Escape From Life?

From the series: Tough Questions: No Easy Answers

Scripture: Jeremiah 45:5; John 12:20-28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
July 27, 1997

Transcription of the spoken sermon

A question I often ask myself as a pastor, a teacher of this religious community, is whether I am an agent of human wholeness or of human weakness.

Do I enable my people better to face life and cope with reality as I understand it, or, do I shield and shelter you from life and reality, perpetuating beliefs and ideas that are really at odds with what I believe to be true about the universe, the human experience and the nature of religion?

We are considering tough questions for which there are no easy answers and in this sermon I raise the question whether religion is really an escape from life. By that, I mean whether our religious belief and practice may be an expression of human fear and weakness in the face of the reality of our human experience and, further, whether perhaps religion's focus on another world and a hereafter becomes a detriment to the full engagement with and celebration of this world and this life.

As we saw last week, religion is a universal human phenomenon; the study of the human species from the most highly developed societies to the most remote and primitive, manifests religious belief and practice of one sort or another. That is because religion's origin lies in the core questions that reside in the human consciousness.

At some point in the cosmic evolutionary development of billions of years, the energy of the Big Bang coalesced into inorganic matter that, over the stretch of billions of years, evolved into organic or living matter. The development eventuated in living matter, in the case of animal life, coming to consciousness. Self-consciousness, awareness of oneself and of the other. With self-consciousness dawned the realization that death is universal; the human creature recognized the fact of mortality and the presence of suffering, anguish, questions that cannot be repressed finally, questions about the meaning of existence.

It is out of such deep questions that religions arise in the multi forms of their manifestations.

Our focus last week was on the question at the core - What Lies Beyond Death's Veil? I suggested that perhaps that was the core question of the core questions about human existence. There is, however, an equally anguishing question – the more human existence came under thoughtful scrutiny, and cumulative human experience became available for reflection – and that is the question of human suffering.

Let me make it concrete; we need no long treatise on the mystery of suffering and how suffering defies meaning and reduces us to numb silence. Late Friday evening I was called and responded by making a midnight run to Grand Rapids, Butterworth Hospital, The Children's Unit. Five-year-old Lydia Hatton had been brought in in order to try to bring excruciating pain under control. For 16 months she and her parents, Brett and Carla, have carried on a fierce battle against the killer cancer that refuses to be stymied and defeated.

The child is beautiful, brilliant, adorable. And the child's body is racked with pain. And the child is dying. A child. Wide awake at midnight, she counted to 100 for me.

No stone has been left unturned to find a cure and health for Lydia. The suffering increases as the end approaches. What does one say to Brett and Carla?

One best not say anything; I told them I have nothing to say. I was there simply to hug them and hold them as we wept together.

Certainly, death consciously confronted raised the questions that gave rise to religion. And, perhaps, even more for us, who have become aware of the full scope of the human drama, suffering drives us to the questions of meaning and meaninglessness. Religion has been throughout human history the means by which, through which, people have responded to the reality of death and the painful aspects of life.

Religion has provided a teaching, a cultic form for worship, and a way to live, or a moral code. Until the 18th century, God's existence was taken for granted, however God might have been conceived. Worship, through cultic action, sacrifice, penance and prayer, was the means to gain favor, be in harmony with, appease or cajole the deity, thereby preserving life and securing blessing. Thus, fear, suffering, a sense of vulnerability and weakness before powers and forces beyond a person's control were the origin of ritual, sacrifice and prayer - the ingredients of religion.

Ludwig Feuerbach, to whom I referred last week as the source of the projection theory that led to the whole development of modern atheism, saw God as a human invention. This is what he meant by projection. Feuerbach claimed that religion is fundamentally a product of human instinct for self-preservation, of human egoism. The person projects an objective Being as real beyond him or herself and that Being possesses the powers, desires and wishes in ideological

form which the human being finds in him or herself. The person then worships this transcendent Being, which is only one's own idealized self. In weakness, the person depends on this supernatural being of their own construction. Feuerbach claimed, "What man wishes to be, he makes his God." Consequently, the idea of God is nothing but human fantasy born out of desire for this perfect being to exist in order to be leaned on in the midst of life's trials, suffering and uncertainties.

This, Feuerbach claimed, cultivated weakness in humankind. Rather than celebrating humanity in its infinite spirit, we worship a perfect being "out there" and miss the grandeur of this world. He saw it as his task, a task given even more radical expression by Karl Marx, to turn the attention of the human species from God to the human, from heaven to earth, from the hereafter to the here and now.

In his critique of Feuerbach, Hans Küng in *Does God Exist?*, begins by recognizing much truth in Feuerbach's description of religion and the role it plays in human experience. The evidence of religion as a human security blanket, as a buffer against the darkness, the pain and the suffering of human experience is too obvious to question. In the wake of the emergence of modern atheism, scholars from various fields have expressed the implication of a heaven devoid of God and an earth devoid of heaven. Eric Fromm in *Man for Himself*, has written,

There is only one solution to his problem: to face the truth, to acknowledge his fundamental aloneness in a universe indifferent to his fate, to recognize that there is no power transcending him which can solve his problem for him.

The biologist Jacques Monod, in his Nobel prize winning work, *Chance and Necessity*, declares,

If he accepts this (negative) message in its full significance, man must at last wake out of his millenary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world; a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings or his crimes. (p. 160)

Such expression of the consequence of the development of modern atheism has a chilling effect, but it does point out a major function that religion has performed in the human story. Fearful of being alone, of being powerless, a pawn of arbitrary and capricious cosmic forces, the creature come to consciousness devises a means by which to tame the powers, to appease an offended deity, to gain favor and blessing. No one surveying the human story and aware of the function of religion can deny that there is much truth in such an analysis.

Before we rise up in protest and accuse those who have come to such a conclusion of godlessness and wickedness, we would do better to take seriously the critique, to recognize the validity of this description of religion's role in the history of the race.

Having done that with as much candor as we can summon, we might then go on to inquire whether, having analyzed religion thus, that is all there is to say, or might there be something more? That religion can be used to deny the darkness and escape life's harsh edge, to project to the future what is longed for and missed in the present, cannot be denied. To the question, "Is Religion really an escape from life," one can only answer - all too often. That religion as a human structure in its wide variety of forms is a coping mechanism for conscious creatures quaking before threat and loss is too obvious to deny.

I have no argument with Feuerbach or Marx or Freud or Nietzsche on that score. To the degree that religion has, consequently, debased the person and dehumanized people, causing them to remain in infancy and adolescence rather than growing to maturity, taking responsibility for their lives and their world, working at transformation and the movement toward Spirit and shalom, I, too, would criticize it and distance myself from it.

But, this I would claim against those who say Religion is nothing more than escape - might religion be universal not simply because of the universality of human death and suffering that has spawned its presence, but because of a response to an encounter from beyond or from the depths?

Might not the human creature in his or her consciousness be aware of an inner dialogue with "Something" or "Someone," a dialogue in which the first word issues from the other side? And is there not evidence that religion has been not only a coping structure to keep the darkness at bay, but also a divine imperative to speak some word, to act out some conviction no matter what the price? Has not religion also been a force for transformation of society, challenging established orders that have become demonic and oppressive.

I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, certainly one of the great human spirits of this century who was martyred 52 years ago as the Second World War was ending - a victim of the darkness spread by Hitler and the Nazi regime.

He saw the underside of religion. He saw how religion appealed to human weakness. He saw how its institutional forms could be coopted by political power and how the religious institution sought to perpetuate itself by addressing the human being at his or her weakest point. I've included in the liturgy some citations from his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

But, one cannot read that spiritual testament without recognizing that it was precisely his spiritual center that enabled him to throw himself into the conflict, to risk and finally offer up his life in the cause of humanity which is, he believed, the cause of God.

It was from Bonhoeffer that I learned of Jeremiah 45. In his thin volume there are over a hundred scripture citations, but five times he refers to Jeremiah 45. Obviously, it became for him a key life text.

Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch, who recorded Jeremiah's words, was in despair. When Babylon carried off the exiles, they left some Jews in the land, among them Jeremiah and Baruch. But now those who remained were going to flee to Egypt for protection. Jeremiah spoke against it, but was forced, nonetheless, to go along and it was true also for Baruch. In chapter 45, Baruch cries out in weariness and despair. God's word comes to him through the prophet -

You sought great things for yourself. Seek not your advantage. Be true to your risky faith; ask no more.

But, there is a promise -

I will give you your life. You will survive.

Or, at least that for which you stand, that for which you have stood up - that vision, that truth - that will survive.

Jeremiah's life was taken in Egypt.

Bonhoeffer's life was taken by the Nazis.

But, they lived, true to their vision. That is to live.

And what shall we say of Jesus?

As the crisis broke upon him, in the phrase of John's gospel, "The hour," he said,

What should I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.

Is religion really escape from life? Much religion much of the time is just that. But, that is not its truest, highest function. It can also be response to a word, a call from beyond, from the depths to commit oneself to an alternative vision.

Sometimes, like Jesus and Jeremiah and Bonhoeffer, we are caught in the dismantling phase - to tear down and pluck up, to use Jeremiah's call; sometimes we may die in the darkness with the exhaustion of Baruch, the dereliction of Jesus, "My God, why ..."

But, if some truth has grasped us, some vision possessed us, then to be true to that vision, that word is to find life by losing life.

Such religious passion is not escape; it is rather the catalyst to engagement with life - and that is the only life worth living.