

Dropping the Salvation Fantasy

From the series: Spiritual Life – Religion Re-Imagined

Text: Psalm 131; John 3:1-10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I begin this morning a brief series of messages on the spiritual life—re-imagining religion. The connection between the two is this: they are not the same, but religion provides the form and the structure for the expression of one's spiritual life. I believe it is good to think about that and perhaps to make an attempt to re-imagine that religion, because religious forms and structures can aid and abet the expression of our spiritual life, or hinder and block, causing the spirit to wither. And so, from time to time, it is good to ask ourselves about our religious practice, our religious experience, the structures and the forms that we utilize in the expression of our spiritual life.

Thomas Moore's book *The Soul's Religion* was a trigger for this discussion. Some years ago, Moore wrote *The Care of the Soul*, which impressed me a great deal. I like this book, too, not so much that I intend to share what he speaks of there, but I like the format. He speaks autobiographically. And as I was reading his story, I was reminded of my story and the fact that there is a great similarity in that he was deeply rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition, coming to the point of ordination to the priesthood when he left the Church. Deeply traditioned as he was, he has never been able to get it out of his soul, nor does he want to. But with its form and structure, the institution can no longer be the vehicle by which he can express the spirituality of his life.

As I thought about his autobiographical expression, I began to think about mine. I have spoken for a long time about being in the springtime of my senility, but I have spoken about it so long that I suppose I should confess that I am well into the summer of it now. So rather than trying to remember these things, I decided to make a list. I identified eight transformations in my own pilgrimage, my own experience, and I share them with you, not because you are so interested in mine, but because as I do this, perhaps I can do for you what Thomas Moore did for me—cause you to think, “Where have I been? Where have I moved? Where have I come to and where am I going?”

Well, this is my story; this is my list.

*I have come from a conservative orthodoxy to a liberal openness.
I have moved from a supernatural theism to a religious naturalism.
I have moved from religion as verifiable truth to religion as experience of
the sacred dimension of all reality.
I have moved from religion's dogma to religion as poetry, from religion as
institution to religion as community, from religion as consisting of
absolute truth to religion as emerging experience, from Christianity as
exclusive to Christianity as one magnificent window opening on the holy
and the sacred.
And finally, I have moved from religion as salvation from damnation to
religion as celebration of life.*

That is quite a journey. I have made a slight course adjustment, some might say 180 degrees, and I would have to agree. Most people who have gone through that kind of transformation, most Christian leaders or religious leaders, I should say, have simply left the institution. They have left the institution probably as an expression of honesty and their own integrity, no longer able to profess, to affirm the institution's forms and structure and creedal statements. They simply have left the institution as it was. And, of course, there are others who have been invited to leave the institution because their views were judged to be heretical.

I have been very fortunate, and I think my experience has been a rather rare experience, in that I have been able to continue the spiritual quest, to continue to wrestle and struggle with the faith within a community because you have joined with me. You have gone with me on this journey, some of you kicking and screaming all the way. Some of you were relieved because you were already there before I was. And some of you, frankly, were just sort of watching from the sidelines, not really engaged.

Whatever the case, I have had the rare privilege of being out of the institution, but not out of a community that is a continuing spiritual community on a journey, on a spiritual quest. Thank God for that, because I'd starve otherwise. I am of no practical good for anything else. But more than that, it is the passion of my life to create a community for that narrow niche of people who have gone through the same kind of transformation that I have and have doggedly refused just to throw in the towel and to give up on the spiritual life. And so, it is with a great deal of gratitude that I recognize, having gone through such a transformation, that there still is a community in which we can engage together on the spiritual quest with a freedom to re-imagine religion and to bring our understanding of religion more into conformity with our general human experience.

This is a wonderful time to be doing this, because we are in a time between the times. Maybe that is always true to some extent, but it certainly is true in this period of history in which we are living. This period has been going on for some

time. I don't know when something will gel out in the future, but we are in a time between the times.

Those who study the philosophical development and religious theological development, the history of ideas, put the past into periods. They will speak of the ancient world and then perhaps the medieval world, and that medieval world included the Reformation world in which my particular brand of faith was honed. From there we have modernity, the last three and a half centuries, the modern period. We have spoken of that many times, characterizing it as the rise of critical thinking, the empirical method of verification spurring the development of all the natural sciences. It included the nineteenth century with the rise of historical consciousness and the sense of everything developing, the whole evolutionary cosmic emerging drama. And modernity presented a tremendous challenge to the old orthodoxy, to the age of faith, so that we are now at a time between the times. Modernity has been around long enough. Today there are those who speak of post-modernity, but that's a story I won't get into. Let me simply say that modernity has been around long enough so that its challenge has produced a reaction in our world today, a reaction we speak of as Fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism is a reaction to the threat to religious forms and structures and creedal statements that is brought on by critical rationality and by scientific discovery of the nature of reality, of historical development, and so on. The Fundamentalist is one who reacts against that because he or she feels threatened, because a religious community is really a cultural, linguistic community. We have our own language, our own vocabulary, our own forms, our own structures, and our own rituals. As long as we operate in that little circle, we are comfortable. It triggers meaning for us. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the scripture readings, the prayers and hymns, all trigger meaning. A certain vocabulary is used, a certain phraseology, and that community is comfortable with it.

Now when you begin to analyze all of this, take it apart, it becomes scary. Our meaning and our life are tied up in that cultural linguistic complex of things. When that begins to be threatened, the Fundamentalist is born. (Someone has defined the Fundamentalist as one who reiterates yesterday's answers to today's questions.) Religious experience becomes more and more disconnected from everyday experience, because out in the world of business, the world of industry, the world of the arts, philosophy, or education, life goes on. New knowledge brings new methods, new breakthroughs, new technologies, and we enter into that whether we are Fundamentalists or not.

Now if I am a Fundamentalist I fly in jets, access the Internet, and invest in stocks and bonds. There is no way my religious community and commitments are going to keep me from being part of the broader cultural scene. But my religious experience, in that case, becomes more and more disconnected from the broader world; it becomes a compartment of my life rather than watering the whole flow of my life. And so the Fundamentalist reaction is a recognition that we are in a

time between the times; the old is dying, and the new is too frightening to consider.

I did my devotions yesterday with the *Grand Rapids Press* as I always do on Saturday morning, in order to find some fodder for my sermon or something to get excited or angry about, and I'm usually successful. I am thinking about all of this and then I read this big article about how the mainline denominations, all of them, have commissioned a survey about how to grow again. This is really a survey about how to survive, because they all know they are dying, having all experienced significant membership loss. I could have told them what they found out with a lot less cost.

The survey revealed that churches need leaders who are innovative and creative and who are persistent in their purpose. They decided they can no longer build churches simply for "waspy" folks like us. They have to go after racial groups, ethnic and minority groups, and so forth. Well, I wonder why, when there are still enough waspy folks around. The crisis is that they are asking the wrong question. Why are people dropping out? Why are there thousands fewer church members today than there were ten years ago? Is the issue Church survival? Is it to try to figure out how you can hold on, hang on? Or ought the institutional forms be so open, flexible, fluid and free that they can shape themselves around our changing lives?

On the back page of the same article was a story about the Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor who participated in Rudy Giuliani's request to have a prayer service in Yankee Stadium after September 11. Do you remember the story? Yankee Stadium was full and there was a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim and a Hindu, and they had a service in which they sang "God Bless America" and prayers were offered for the nation. The Lutheran pastor who participated as a Christian is about to be ousted from the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church because his participation in that service might have given the impression that there are other gods or other ways to God.

That kind of thing is really atrocious, isn't it? If you are thoughtful, if you are sensitive at all, you would say such an institution really deserves to die because it is mindful of its own life, its own particularity with a kind of absolutist exclusivism that a thoughtful, sensitive, intelligent person could not honestly affirm in our world, in our day.

The old institutional forms are dying. We are in a time between the times when the old is dying. I don't know how long it will take. Maybe there will be another blush of triumph and another hundred years or so, but the old institutional forms are dying.

The other reaction to the whole movement of modernity is one of modern atheism or agnosticism or just simply the writing off of the spiritual life as though

one was an animal. The extreme expression of that is nihilism, that there is no meaning, nothing means anything. The nihilist would simply say that this whole cosmic drama is just a chance accident unwinding who knows where, and certainly with no purpose, with no meaning whatsoever. And then there are hordes of our contemporaries who, without consciously saying, “I am a nihilist,” are living a nihilist existence, barren of any kind of transcendent dimension in their life.

T.S. Eliot wrote a poem, “*The Waste Land*,” his poetic commentary on modernity, in which he speaks about the great Western religious symbols as a “heap of broken images.” That’s where it is for a lot of people. With the eruption of critical thinking and the scientific method and the whole rise of modernity, the tragedy was that religious people were threatened and so they fought it. Many in the scientific community insisted that what they were dealing with was all there was, and there was a great deal of hubris on that side. And so many who were thoughtful and intelligent, simply dropped out. In the West, the intellectual elite left institutional religion, although they have continued in some kind of personal spiritual pilgrimage.

We are in the time between the times when on the one hand there is a shrill Fundamentalism that is afraid because it is losing its grip, and on the other a barren spirituality that lives just a little bit above an animal existence. So it is a wonderful time to be thinking about this.

Where do we go? Well, I suggest in the title that we drop the salvation fantasy. Just drop the salvation fantasy. What do I mean by the salvation fantasy? I mean that God is a creator who created humankind perfectly, that humankind was tested and failed the test, came under the curse of God’s wrath and stands in threat of eternal damnation. Then God provided in Jesus Christ the atoning death, taking our sin and guilt, therefore offering forgiveness for those who repent and believe, assuring them of heaven.

That is the story; that is the myth. I don’t care whether you take the lilting liturgy of the Anglican community or the passionate address of evangelist Billy Graham or the rumblings of television evangelist Jerry Falwell. Down deep that is the story. That is the myth. That is what is being talked about. It may be talked about in sophisticated tones or it may be talked about in down and dirty, blunt language.

I am suggesting that we ought simply to give it up. Give up the idea that God created a creature, put it to the test, and then failing the test, will damn it unless there is repentance and acceptance of Christ’s atoning death. That picture of God makes God a monster and the picture of humankind is degrading. We are not God-damned creatures. We are animals emerging out of the jungle with all of the survival instincts clinging to us. But we are something more. Something within us lifts up our eyes and lifts up our hearts and beckons us beyond where we are.

Something tells us that what we see is not all there is. We are magnificent creatures.

Are we lost? O, my God, we're lost. Of course we are lost. We are trying to find our way. That is really what the whole religious quest is all about, the spiritual quest; trying to find our way. Who are we, after all? It is not as though God is angry with us, alienated from us. We're just simply lost.

Salvation? Of course. That word has its root in *salve*, meaning "healing". Do we need salvation? Of course we need salvation. We are a blind and lost people, barren in our spiritual life and confused and disoriented. Do we need help? Dear God, we need help. But that is exactly what the invitation is from the God who would never abandon us, the God who embraces us, the God who calls us into a web of meaning. God is not "out there" somewhere, but that sacred and holy dimension which is in us and beyond us, which binds us together in a web of meaning and relationship.

You might be surprised that a sermon on dropping the salvation fantasy should have in its text the words "born again." But I think of old Nicodemus. I suppose that the author of the fourth Gospel was trying to bring Nicodemus to the attention of the Jews who were trying to continue in Judaism without following Jesus: "Look, one of your own leaders followed Jesus. He is a model, an example for all of you." Old Nicodemus, a rabbi, a member of the Sanhedrin, a leader of the Jewish people, a representative of the best of Judaism, the best of Israel, came to Jesus one night to say, "What in the world is going on? Who are you? Who am I? What's up?" And Jesus said, "You have to be born again." Or born from above, or born spiritually.

It is not so different from what I've experienced. I've been "born again." I've seen things that I looked at forever and never saw before. I've had fresh spiritual insight, was able to move out of the cramped and crimped straitjacket of original orthodoxy that claimed to be the exclusive truth and into the spacious grace of inquiry, of openness, and freedom. Religion needs to be re-imagined so that one like Nicodemus who was deeply rooted in the establishment could come and be confounded by the statement that he had to be born again. Born again not as Jimmy Carter popularized it, not as the television evangelists harangue us about it, but born again with eyes to see and ears to hear, with a fresh awareness of new openness, and with a hunger and a thirst and an ongoing spiritual quest that is never done, but always inviting us to something more and something beautiful.

Did you hear that marvelous statement of Psalm 131? "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me, but I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother." There is a certain humility and rest and trust and peace, knowing that we are woven together in the bundle of life which consists of

beautiful relationships and deep and profound meaning that causes us to see the wonder and the miracle, the glory and the joy of life, which is a gift full of grace.

Last evening I sat on the bluff and watched the sunset and in that magnificent western sky illumined by the globe, the sun poured its radiance across the waters and there was a path of yellow gold. Then I went up into the loft and continued to work as the evening sky emerged. When I looked out the window later, I saw the silver crescent of a moon next to the evening star and noticed on the lake that the yellow gold path had become a silver path of moonlight, and I said, "O, my God."

And it is enough.