

Religion as Prozac

From the series: Religion: Significant Critique and Fresh Expression

Scripture: Matthew 11:28

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I began last week a series of message in which I want to acknowledge the significant critique of religion that arose in the last century, and doing it in order that we might find fresh expression, in order that we might respond to those meaningful criticisms that were made of religion.

The critique of religion in the 19th century was really a natural follow-up to the whole transformation of the landscape through the development in the 18th century of the scientific method, empirical investigation, actually looking at the world and observing, experimenting, testing. The scientific method which has shaped our whole modern understanding of reality, getting its full speed in the 18th century eventuated in the 19th century with the development we call historical thinking when people began to think about where they were in light of the past, how things developed, the history of institutions, forms and structures, religion being one of them. We began to understand that one can only understand the present in light of that which gave it birth and through its development over years or centuries or millennia.

So, people began to think about their religious experience, for example, their religious tradition in terms of the history of its development, and began to see, began to understand that, as we said last week, religion is a human construct, that really all of the respective religions are human constructs. They can't be anything else. A Moses has an experience of a burning bush and I would say a genuine and authentic experience of the mystery that we call God. But, how does it come to expression? The only possibility is through human language, and if that is an authentic experience of the living God, a community will gather around it, and if a community gathers around it, there will be a teaching. Somehow or other a Moses will have to explicate that experience. Before long, there is a creed, and as a community gathers, it will have forms of expression, liturgies, rituals, prayers, hymns; that whole cultic experience will be produced. And then, of course, someone will say in light of that experience, then how should we live? And so you have the whole ethical domain.

We began to see that that is the nature of religion - a founding experience, a teaching, a mode of devotion, a way of life. And the reason that religion has been a universal human experience is that it is that exercise, that observance in which we are consciously and intentionally engaged with that ultimate mystery of things, those ultimate questions that drive our existence. Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What does it mean? What is the purpose of it all? Is there any meaning or purpose in this human existence of mine? Those are questions that are age-old; they dawn with the dawning consciousness of the human person, and they are with us still. They haven't run out of their legitimacy or their validity. They are the inevitable questions.

An interesting thing happened in the 19th century. Along came those social revolutionaries and among those social revolutionaries, reflecting on the history of religion and seeing religion as dealing with those ultimate questions, was a thinker named Ludwig Feuerbach who recognized that the mark of the human being is that a human being can jump out of his or her skin and reflect on him or herself.

We don't have a dog anymore, but I used to love to use our dog as an example. Hershey could look at me with those beautiful big brown eyes, but he never scratched his ear and said, "Here I am, looking at you looking at me." Now, I will do that. I might pause for a moment and say, "Here I am on this stool, speaking to you who are listening to me," and I might reflect on this moment. I might jump out of my skin and observe myself in this moment. That's a mark of being human. That's self-consciousness. That's the capacity for self-transcendence.

Feuerbach recognizing that capacity for self-transcendence, said that is exactly what God is. God is the project, the product, the projection of our wishes and desires and fears and sense of dependence projected outward unto the screen of reality. God is simply the projection of man's own infinite nature. It must have been an idea whose day had come because it caught fire, it struck gold, it became the unquestioned assumption of much 19th century thinking. And then along came Karl Marx, who said religion is not just the projection of the individual's wishes and desires outward; rather, religion is the projection of society's hopes and dreams outward. Marx said Feuerbach dealt with the essence of the human, but that is an abstraction. Religion is really the result of people who are suffering, who are finding consolation in the promise of another world, a better world, a world where there are streets of gold and angels in attendance and the glory of God. Marx said religion is the opium of the people.

Now, that from many pulpits has been pounded on and misconstrued, really. Marx was not criticizing religion at that point. Marx was saying the function of religion is to console people who are living in human anguish, and in that sense, it was a positive thing. It enabled people in dire human circumstances, which marked 19th century European mass population, to get comfort, consolation. In their human distress and oppression, they are consoled by the comforts of

religion which is the construction of another world and another age, that gives them hope and it keeps them going.

Now, Marx went further to say that because they are consoled and comforted, and because they are kept somewhat at peace, they don't see their world as a world that needs to be changed. They accept their oppressed situation, waiting for their vindication and eventual redemption in another world, in another time, and to that extent, Marx was critical of religion. To that extent, Marx believed that one had to tear the flowers off the chains that bound the human being, not simply so the human being would live with the bleak chains, but so that the human being finding that, in fact, we are bound and shackled, would throw off the shackles, and of course, Karl Marx was looking for that great social revolution. Marx was looking for the class warfare, for the workers of the world to arise and to overthrow the rulers of this world and to bring in the classless society, the Utopia, in which case he said, in Utopia religion will disappear because there won't be any need for religion. It will be superfluous, because in a classless society where all are living equitably and justly, there would be no need for the consolations of religion. And so, it will simply disappear.

Lenin, following Marx, said not simply that religion is the opium of the people, but that it is opium for the people, and he charged the priesthood and the rich and powerful of the world, those who held the power, with intentionally keeping people in the shackles through the consolation of religion. He saw it as a scheme, as a conspiracy. Keep the people singing hymns so that they don't realize how bad their situation really is.

That was the critique in the 19th century, a powerful critique of institutional religion and primarily Christian religion, Judeo-Christian religion, at least, and it is a criticism that had a great deal of legitimacy, for the Church did miss the boat with the working class, the masses of the European continent of the 19th century. There was a great alienation. I suspect that Europe in its post-Christian state today may be in part, at least, explained by the failure of the 19th century Church to deal with the actual social problems of the 19th century. There was a collusion of throne and altar and those who were in control and set the terms for society failed to recognize the alienation of the masses, and that was a legitimate criticism, the fruit of which we are reaping even today.

There was another factor that Marx saw clearly and that was that religion was still claiming that it could explain the world rather than recognizing that religion doesn't explain the world, science explains the world. We were in that transition period when religion was still trying to say that in the Bible, for example, there is a knowledge of history and there is the explanation of scientific reality, the reality of our world, and it enabled Marx to show the backward looking, close-mindedness of the Church. The Church has been dragged kicking and screaming into the kingdom at every point with the explosion of human knowledge. As I said last week, good religion will open the mind but traditional religion has

characteristically sought to close the mind, and so there was that battle between exploding knowledge and the retro view of the Church and that enabled Marx's criticism to be more poignant because it was obvious to those who sat up and looked. As a matter of fact, the world was exploding with knowledge while the Church lived in its benighted, dogmatic slumber. There was a significant criticism of religion and as always happens we don't believe strongly enough, we don't trust deeply enough in the Church and so we react very poorly to those criticisms.

But, we can also look from the perspective of 100 or 150 years to see that, thank God, Marx was wrong. Marx was wrong in his analysis of social development and the way that history would go. Marx didn't foresee it all, that a dominant capitalism had the capacity to change and to become more socially sensitive. The great class warfare, thank God, never eventuated, and Marx's Utopia which was a figment of his imagination anyway, of course, never arrived. So, we can say that in his historical development and his view of the future, he was wrong. But I think the most fundamental way in which Marx was wrong is his failure to understand the nature of religion and this is really where I changed my mind about what I wanted to say this morning. Marx was saying, as a matter of fact somewhat positively, that religion is a sedative, it's a narcotic, that it dulls people to the pain of existence. Lenin, as I said, more negatively said that it is fed to people in order to bewitch them, in order to drug them and give them no sense of the reality of the life that they are living. And religion can have that manifestation. Religion can be an orgy.

Once in a while I watch that late night television stuff and I see people totally entranced and at other times whooping it up in the pews and dancing in the aisles and blowing whistles and waving their hands and being slain in the Spirit, being absolutely like a cold mackerel at the altar, and I think to myself that is nothing but a narcotic. It reminds me of the person about the fourth row one week here years ago who started saying "Amen" and pretty soon waving the arms, and getting generally enthusiastic about the sermon, when an usher went up and tapped him on the shoulder and the man said, "I got religion," to which the usher replied, "Well, you didn't get it here."

So, I look at some of that and I realize that religion can drug, it can be an emotional orgy. And then, this is where I changed my mind, I said to myself, "What's wrong with that?" Because Marx was right - it's tough to be human. Now, there aren't any that I know of here that would fit into that 19th century oppressed class for which Marx spoke prophetically, but what Marx thought was that religion was just a consolation for those who were oppressed. He failed to realize that religion is something far deeper in the human being, dealing with those ultimate questions which we, be we poverty-stricken, hungry and naked, or among the rich and the famous, have those questions that cannot be denied. Human existence is tough and we are all faced with those limit situations. We celebrate births, but children die and, as a matter of fact, we'll all die and what does it mean to be a part of this human scene? Those are questions that fill us

with wonder and sometimes with deep confusion, and before it, we seek some meaning, some clue to what it is all about.

Why are you here this morning? Why have you stuck with the Church when multitudes and multitudes and many of them clear-eyed and thinking people, have simply abandoned the Church? Why are we still doing this?

I suspect because we still feel the need, the importance of community, of a supportive community in which we can engage in the human quest together, in which we can raise our questions, in which before the mystery of life and in its joys and in its sadness, we can be supportive of one another, a community in which we can experience care and express compassion. I suppose those of us who haven't left are simply giving evidence of an ongoing spiritual hunger and thirst. I said to someone not so long ago, most of the people to whom I could appeal have left the Church and most of the people still in the Church wish I had left. There are all kinds of spiritual hunger, all kinds of questions and all kinds of questings out in the world beyond the walls of the Church because religion is not just a matter of consoling people in their oppression as a kind of narcotic, a sedative against reality, but it is the quest, the human quest. Our religion is a human construct, but it becomes the agent and the vehicle by which we come into the presence of that ultimate mystery and are faced with those ultimate questions and find a community in which we can think together and reflect together and, in the meantime, find that supportive love and encouragement that enables us to go on in the midst of deep waters, through the fiery furnace, knowing that we are not alone.

I found a piece in Cahill's *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, which is a quote from Potok's *Asher Lev*, a story of Asher Lev, an observant Jew going into The Duomo in Florence, this great, grand structure, and, finding Michelangelo's final old Pieta, as an observant Jew, is transfixed by it and he stares at it. He said,

I stared at the geometry of the stone and felt the stone luminous with strange suffering and power. I was an observant Jew, yet that block of stone moved through me like a cry... like the call of seagulls over morning surf, like the echoing blasts of the shofar sounded by the Rebbe. I do not mean to blaspheme. My frames of reference have been finally formed by the life I have lived. I do not know how a devout Christian reacts to that Pieta; I was only able to relate it to elements in my own lived past. I stared at it. I walked slowly around it. I do not remember how long I was there that first time. When I came back out into the brightness of the crowded square, I was astonished to discover my eyes were wet.

(Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, p. 302F)

Somehow or other, all of the human suffering, for Asher Lev, was gathered up in that sculpture and in a moment transfixed, the stone like a cry, pierced him.

One never knows when or where that will happen. Authentic religion is the opening of the soul and the heart to that which will not be domesticated in our religious structures nor our creedal formulas nor our liturgies, but that which will address us as human, speaking to us of a mysterious dimension of reality that we can never grasp, but in the meantime, in the moment, it is speaking to us words such as, "All will be well. All will be well. All manner of things will be well."

Religion is the poetry of the soul that lives in a world that can be explained by the natural sciences in terms of its structure of reality. Religion gives us the images that somehow or other inspire hope, that speak to that longing, that thirsting, that yearning for that we know not what, but we call God.

Five or six years ago there were ten million people on Prozac and 80% responded favorably. That's wonderful. It's wonderful how our unbalanced chemistry can be brought into balance to enhance life and to make us alive, fully alive, fruitful and effective. So, all hail to Prozac. So, why not religion as Prozac? Why not in the midst of my sweaty existence, hearing a word like "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." I suspect you come here week after week for a phrase of a hymn, a paragraph of the scripture, a song, or the meanderings of a preacher and just maybe sometimes, now and again, there is the rifting of the sky and heaven shines through, and that's as good, maybe better, than Prozac, although it can be addicting.

References:

Thomas Cahill. *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus*. Anchor, 2001.