

Religion Made On Earth

From the series: Religion: Significant Critique and Fresh Expression

Text: Isaiah 44:18; Acts 17:27-28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
July 23, 2000

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Today and for a few weeks to follow I want to speak to you about religion in order that we might understand more clearly that in which we are engaged as a worshipping community. I want us to consider the nature of this phenomenon of religion which for us is still important and informs us not only in our worship, but also in our way of life. For many people, perhaps, religion is less important, and they have fallen away. And yet, back over the eons of time religion has been endemic to the human situation. As long as there have been those whom we would denominate human, we find traces of religion.

The practice of religion is really the attempt of the creature to come into relationship with the Ultimate Reality. Call that Ultimate Reality what you will—God, the mystery, the sacred, the holy. Think of it in terms that are personal or think of it in terms of some life force, whatever that may be, and that Ultimate Mystery has been thought of in all those ways. As a matter of fact, human beings try to figure out what in the world is going on, who we are, where we have come from, and what will be the issue of our being here.

Is there any meaning to the practice of religion? Is there any purpose? Is that meaning or purpose intrinsic in the process of itself, or is meaning something we bring to the process and create in the midst of it? All of those options are open. But I believe to be human is to be religious, because to be human is to live in the presence of a Mystery.

We didn't create ourselves. We are here by a grace or a fate, and we live and move and have our being. We live before a Mystery that is beyond us, that cannot be fully grasped but has been experienced—according to the testimony of people down through the ages who have encountered it in some concrete way. That Ultimate Reality breaks through, or bubbles up.

In any case, to be human is to come at some point to recognize that life has an ultimate ground and source and to wonder about it. The religions of the world are human phenomena that are the consequences of someone's experience, the

results of which gathered a community or cult that developed a way of worship, liturgy, prayers, hymns, sacraments, and rituals of various kinds. The community, the cult, called those who followed that way to a way of life, an ethics, a morality.

Religion is a human phenomenon, and what I want to say this morning in this first message is very simple, but if you really hear me, it's very radical. You won't hear it often in church, but I believe that it is simple and it is true: religion is made on earth; it is a human construct. Religion didn't fall ready-made from heaven. There is no absolute religion with God's stamp on it as over against all of the other religions practiced by the diversity of humankind. All religion is made on earth and is a human construct.

If you could buy that, I wouldn't have to preach anymore. We would recognize together that what we have is a story, a way of devotion and a way of life which is the consequence of long history. It is the consequence of some who had an encounter with that Mystery, told their story and created what has become for us the Christian tradition, flowing out of the Jewish tradition, and of course, the biblical tradition.

One might ask, "Well, isn't it true?"

Is a sunset true? Is a poem true? Of course, it's true. It is true in the sense that it puts us in communion with God. It satisfies the hunger of our heart. It elicits from us what is noble and best. It gives us a reason for being. It gives us a hope. It enables us to go on to tomorrow. Of course, it's true. But religion is not true in the sense that a chemical formula is true, not in the sense that the hard stuff of the natural sciences is true. It is not empirical and verifiable. Religion is a judgment call. Religion is a choice. Religion is a response to a story. It is engagement in worship and community; it is the following of a way of life. Religion can be good or less good, but not true or false in a sense in which we deal with true and false in a world marked by the scientific method, empirical investigation. No, religion is a human construct and all of them alike are made on earth.

Now if you can receive that, you will have learned a very radical and very important truth this morning. Oh, I suppose you know it and have known it for a long time, or you probably wouldn't be hanging around here. But nonetheless, I want to underscore it as we begin a series of contemplating the nature and the function and the practice of religion.

In the dawning of human consciousness there were those ultimate questions, the questions which arise because we are human, self-conscious and conscious of the other. The great religious traditions of the world are the consequence of communities gathering around a visionary experience, a founding story.

The problem was, and still is, that there is also something intrinsic in our human nature that wants to take that which is valuable and good and helpful and absolutize it. We want to make it the exclusive way, the exclusive truth. We want to assert dogmatically that the visionary experience we have had, our insight, our intuitive grasp of things is the only way, is the only possible understanding, is the only door to eternal life.

Monotheism, the idea of one God, was a step forward. To say God by definition is to say that Ultimate Mystery, that ultimate source of things. Finally there could be God and none other. There's no problem with that. That was an insightful move. The problem is when, as a monotheist who affirms with some understanding that God can only be one, I claim that one is the God of my particular religious vision, rather than recognizing that my image is a groping after the Ultimate Mystery that lies beyond every concrete God image. In Babylon the Jews were in exile and they were losing their grip, and so the prophet, trying to get them to hang on to their God of Israel, writes this taunting, mocking piece in Isaiah 44. It is full of satire.

“Look how stupid is this idol worship of the Babylonians. Craftsman takes a tree, cuts it in half, with half the tree he builds a fire, warms himself. He cooks his meal. And from the other half he shapes an image. And then he bows down and worships the image. How stupid can you be?” says the prophet.

Not a very nice attitude. Did you catch that? How stupid can you be? The same tree: part of it for a campfire to cook over and to warm him, and the other part of it for an idol, a block of wood shaped and formed, bowed down before. How stupid!

Oh, really? If the prophet had been honest and fair, he would have known. I suspect he did know some of the liturgy of the Babylonian cult. They weren't stupid. They were fully aware that a block of wood shaped into an image was a mediator of the mystery. There are prayers in the Babylonian liturgy that plead for the God of heaven to come down and indwell this image so that God might have a concrete existence in the midst of the people.

Hmm. Sounds like the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Maybe they knew what John knew when he said, “No one has ever seen God, but the only Son has made God clear, or revealed God.”

The prophet was using satire and ridicule because he had this little rag tag band of exiles, and he was trying to hold them together for Yahweh God.

It was harmless. That only becomes dangerous when a group manifests that kind of attitude and spirit and then gets power. If you have power to enforce your monotheism and your exclusive claim, you can become a very dangerous person. Someone once wrote that history is bound to be bloody when it's made by people

who barely understand themselves, yet declare that they understand God perfectly. Then they meet other people who think the same, only differently. And then you have the violence and the hostility and the bitterness that fuels so much of the unrest in the human family. This has always been the case and remains so in our day.

Religion is a human construct. That doesn't mean that it is not the mediator of revelation and saving grace. We believe that Moses was encountered by the living God, but the only way that could come to be a religious movement was through human language, human articulation, human formulation, human cult, liturgy, prayer, ritual, commandments, and a way of life. Every religion has those aspects. Every religion has a story, an experience, an encounter, a vision which issues in a mode of worship and in a way of life.

But you see, if I would claim that my Christian faith or my Jewish-Christian, biblical tradition is true and true alone and the only truth, I would also be saying that Mohammed was just blowing smoke, that what happened to Moses couldn't happen to anyone else, that the Buddha in his moment of enlightenment was not dealing with any ultimate truth breakthrough, that all of the founding stories of the great religious traditions were false, and mine is true.

Well, we have dealt with that often enough here, but I am still struck with its ignorance and its arrogance. Every religion is made on earth. It doesn't fall out of heaven. If it is a good religion, it puts earthlings in touch with heaven. If it's a good religion, it mediates between humans and that Mystery whom no one has ever seen, nor can we know, apart from a gracious unveiling here and there, now and again. But religion is a human business.

Religions are not all the same. Some are better than others in terms of the grace they mediate, in terms of the fruit that follows from the observance, and that can be discussed. As a matter of fact, what cannot be denied is that all of us humans who are religious are engaged in a structure of story, worship, and life which is a human construct.

So then, how do you judge religion?

Well, let me suggest a few things.

Good religion opens the mind. It's easy enough to say, but also indicative of the fact that there has been an awful lot of bad religion, because most religion has not been about opening the mind, but about closing it. It has been about the statement of an absolute deposit of faith beyond which one ought not to think. In other words, it has been about the creation of a box within which one can think all one wants to as long as one doesn't get out of the box.

But good religion will open the mind. Good religion will open us to the reality of this world. It will give us access to all of the sciences and the explosion of knowledge which is so amazing in our day—amazing breakthroughs in biology, for example, that deal with the human being; the Genome project, the DNA mapping, that kind of thing. We don't need to be threatened by that. A good religion will say to us, "Go for it! Understand it. Be fascinated by it, and profit from it." Good religion opens the mind.

Good religion will help us to understand our own religion, and to understand the historical conditions of every religion. We'll begin to see how other religions arose, how they developed, and why they are what they are. Without a kind of absolutism that says mine is true and all the rest are false, I'll come to Isaiah 44 and say, "Prophet, I understand what you were doing in that context, but I don't like your attitude. And you were not fair to Babylonian religion."

It will enable me to say to Paul, who comes to Athens and sees all the temples and all the statues and becomes frustrated and disturbed, that the Athenians were simply seeking the same ultimate Mystery he encountered. He was disturbed because he had this amazing vision. He was gripped by a vision. He believed that all of this imagery and all of these gods and goddesses represented in the city of Athens simply didn't measure up to that which had gripped him and grasped him. He wanted to tell the whole world about the God of Israel who had become incarnate, not in a block of wood, but in a human face.

And it is natural, good and right that he should have shared his vision, as long as he didn't do as the prophet did and denigrate those who were groping after the Mystery. After all, that is what human religion is—groping after the Mystery. Good religion will help us to understand that.

Good religion will give us a sense of why things are the way they are. For example, in our house right now, the aroma is marvelous. There's a pork loin roasting. The clan is coming over. But we didn't invite our Jewish friends. Because of the dietary laws, I wouldn't invite my Jewish friends over for a pork loin. Now why did the Jews have a restriction against pork, or any of the dietary laws? They had a hygienic basis. I suppose they thought pigs were full of trichinosis, and they probably were, and it wasn't healthy. It became a religious thing, but it had a very practical base. Now you tell a pig farmer today that his pork is not the "other white meat" and he will be offended, because those pigs live in palaces now.

Well, then, the dietary law is not necessary anymore, is it? Not really. But is it okay still not to eat pork? Of course, it's okay. But you're not dealing with something that is part of the ultimate structure of reality. It is a choice. A Jewish person might say, "I belong to a Jewish community and we have dietary laws, so that when I eat, I am reminded of God. When I eat, the very way I eat, the things I

eat, the things I don't eat remind me that I am a child of God, the God of Israel is my God." And that's good.

Or maybe there is something we can identify with a little more: the Sabbath, the Jewish Sabbath. What a wonderful institution! I commend it to you. I commend it to myself, for whom every weekend is shot to heaven. But I heard on the news last night that at Camp David yesterday the conversation between Barak and Arafat was casual. Why? Because it was the Sabbath. Now who knows what they really did in the bushes, but for the face of the world, the Sabbath was observed.

Is that good? Sure, it is good. Does it reflect something in the ultimate structure of things? No. The problem is, if everybody was as observant as the Jew and an American Christian who is trying to get an Arab and a Jew together, you'd have the Arab Sabbath on Friday and the Christian Sabbath on Sunday. So you'd have Friday, Saturday and Sunday just written right off and you couldn't get anything done. On the other hand, if three days were spent by our world leaders in the contemplation of Creation and God, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday might be more profitable. But is it something that is in the ultimate structure of things? No. Is it a fruitful, helpful choice? Absolutely. It is good for all of us to observe Sabbath, not because that is the way reality is, but because that reality constructed by us is a very good way to be.

Good religion will help me to understand those things, so that I know that a lot of the things I do are arbitrary. They are judgment calls on my part, and the thing I have to be satisfied with is whether or not it is a means by which I am in communion with, I am in touch with, that Ultimate Mystery. Is it a way that is fruitful in my life? If it is good for me, does it have to be good for you? If something else is good for you, do I have to deny that the something else can be a means of grace for you? No, not at all, because religion is made on earth and it is a human construct.

The point is that religion be faithful and fruitful in mediating to us that Ultimate Mystery that embraces us and undergirds us and overshadows us and gives us life as a gift and hope for the future.

And then, good religion will lead to compassion. I am reading Karen Armstrong's *Battle for God*. Incidentally, I talked to her in London last week and she is going to come here in October of 2001. She stresses again, as she stressed in her *History of God*, how all the great religious traditions call for compassion. Good religion will warm the heart. It will open the mind and it will warm the heart, and it will result in a compassionate people. A lot of good religion has a pretty bad track record, and we still haven't been able to master that one.

Did you see the ABC Evening News at 6:30 last night? I perked up my ears when they said there was a religious problem somewhere in the country. Well, it happened to be in a suburb of Chicago, Palos Heights. On the news screen was

the story of a Muslim community that has outgrown their facility and they were going to buy a church building which was for sale in Palos Heights. Then the Palos Heights Reformed Church appeared on the screen. (I spoke there a few years ago, but they haven't asked me back lately.) The Muslim congregation was going to buy that building until there was an uproar in this suburb of Chicago that is filled with many, many Christian people. And so the City Council offered the Muslim community \$200,000 to just walk away, and they were going to do it until, bless his heart, the mayor said to his council, "Number 1, you say you're going to use that for a recreational facility. A year ago you turned it down because it wasn't large enough. Number 2, we don't have \$200,000 just to pay out. And number 3, the reason you're doing it is wrong."

That's right down the lake, folks. It's not just a religious thing, it's a human thing. It's the fear of the other; it's the threat of that which is different. Good religion will break through to us where we say it cannot be. The world cannot continue in all of the intricacy of the human community to live with that kind of paranoia, that kind of divisiveness, that kind of fear of diversity. Good religion will result in compassion, or it's not worth anything it claims to be.

Good religion will elevate the aesthetic tastes, because there was a day when the Church was the womb of the arts, of magnificent architecture, the beautiful paintings, the lovely music that moves the soul—all of that comes out of the spiritual center that is elevated by the encounter with God. I look around today and see such a terrible loss of the aesthetic sense and the deterioration of religion.

Friends, to be ultimately committed to one's faith and vision does not necessitate the claim that it fell out of heaven. To be totally committed and deeply nurtured in one's faith vision does not necessitate the denial that it is a human construct flowing out of the human experience of God, winning its way through liturgy, prayers, and an effective way of being human. But to acknowledge that religion is made on earth is to be able to join hands and hearts and arms with all God's children, for good religion will understand itself and feel compassion for the other.