

Why Is There So Much Anger in Religion?

From the series: Tough Questions; No Easy Answers

Scripture: Jonah 3, 4; James 1:17-27; Luke 15:25-32

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

One of the fascinating aspects of preaching for me is the way questions, insights, and reflections that lead me to a sermon series that I create, sometimes lead me to deeper levels of reflection and to the analysis of a subject that I had not anticipated. Such is the case in this current series, "Tough Questions: No Easy Answers."

On the surface, the tough questions are simply questions that arise as I reflect on the phenomenon of religious experience. But, I am finding myself with each successive question moving to a deeper level, thinking about religious experience itself or religion itself, its origins, its function in society, its potential for negativity leading to human bondage and oppression as well as its possibilities for human fulfillment and growth.

Take the question raised in this message, "Why is there so much anger in religion?" That is an easily observable fact: anger seethes beneath the surface in the respective religions and in many religious folk.

Once again this past week, terror struck in Jerusalem, bringing death and injury as suicide bombers blew themselves up in a crowded market, assured that such martyrdom would bring them immediately to paradise. In Brooklyn, a bombing plot was preempted by arrest before another tragedy was perpetuated.

What is at work here is not simply religious fanaticism. Religion is often coopted by political opportunists, and cultural humiliation fuels terrorism. Nonetheless, religion is intertwined, often providing legitimation for such acts and, of course, rewards.

In the three great Western religious traditions linked to the Bible, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there are powerful fundamentalist movements that are marked by violent means justified by the ends in view - the establishment of the righteous empire and the destruction of those viewed as the enemy of true belief and practice.

But, we need not go to the radical fringes of religious belief and practice to encounter anger which results in broken community, the erecting of barriers between people - even within families - and the exclusion of anyone who fails to pass whatever litmus test might be established for group identity. We see it all around us.

Why? That is the question. Attempting to find an answer drives us once again to reflect on the phenomenon of religion itself. We typically think of religion as the mediator of meaning, of salvation or healing, of peace and comfort. Are we not taken aback when we realize religion is also a source of anger in its practitioners?

We have become aware in this series of reflections that *religion is a human creation arising out of the experience of death*. The cosmic drama evolves to a point billions of years along where a creature we call human develops the capacity for consciousness, self-awareness and, thereby, the ability to "get out of his skin," to reflect back on himself, becoming aware that "all flesh is mortal." He will die. Those he values in his intimate circle will die. He develops with awareness the capacity to suffer; he encounters the tragic dimension of existence. He asks "Why? What does it mean?"

In the wrestling with such ultimate existential questions with, we might say, life's boundary situations, the human creature, human society, develops structures of meaning which become the means of coping with the mystery of life, of death, of tragedy, of joy. Existence is threatening; life is fragile; the human experience is perilous. Religion arises as a means of negotiating life's passages.

This was articulated powerfully in the 19th century, as we have seen, by the German philosopher/theologian, Ludwig Feuerbach, who was followed by Marx who sought resolution of history's suffering by history's transformation through class warfare; by Freud who saw religion as illusion and salvation by psychotherapy dissolving the power of the distortion within the unconscious and early childhood experience; by Nietzsche who proclaimed "God is dead" and who celebrated "the superman" and the will to power.

Quite naturally, the religious world fought these thinkers who opened up the avenue of modern atheism and denied the truth of their claims. But, their claims made too much sense, had too much the ring of truth. The Church, to speak only of the Christian tradition, went into a defensive posture, simply denying the insight of the modern analysis of religion, failing to recognize that there was really only one issue that demanded denial if religion was to continue to be intelligently practiced; namely, *that human religion had its source, not in the human creature, but in the Question placed in his experience from beyond, from his depths - that religions are human creations but created in response to an address from outside, beyond, the depths.*

Such a claim is grounded on the conviction that there is a Mystery, creative Source of all, that confronts, encounters, puts in question the human creature.

We might speak of it as simply the experience of God, of the Infinite One from whom all flows and to whom all returns.

If we have such a conviction, then we can recognize *the respective religions as the result of some founding vision which resulted in a teaching, a cultic practice, and a code of behavior*. The teaching flows out of the particular vision or epiphany; the cultic practice directs the manner of worship and devotion; the code of behavior gives directions for living in a way congruent with the teaching, or conception of deity.

Thus we have come to see Religion as a human creation, as response to an encounter with God performing a critical function: It provides -

Something to believe,

A manner of worship,

A way to live.

Such a function is mediatory; Religion provides the means by which a person opens him or herself to the experience of the transcendent Mystery, the experience of God. *Religious belief, devotion or practice is never an end in itself. It is rather the agency through which one comes into the presence of God that issues in the experience of love, of grace, of freedom.*

Religion functioning thus fulfills an extremely critical and positive purpose for the human creature for, as we have seen, there is a universal human yearning for some meaning in the face of life's perplexity, some hope and comfort in the presence of human suffering and death.

But, if this is the case, why is there so much anger in religion, or, why is so much anger present in religious communities? That is a tough question and I have no easy answer, but let's think about it together.

One of the most acute analyses of Religion of which I am aware is Charles Davis' forward in his *Temptations of Religion*. Acknowledging the need of structures and institutions to bring some order to our human experience, Davis points to the fatal tendency of all such social structures and institutions to absolutize themselves, becoming ends in themselves rather than understanding themselves as merely means to a greater end - the experience of community or of the transcendent.

Rather than understanding themselves as means to a greater end, as provisional, as relative, they become ends in themselves. They harden, grow rigid, inflexible; unable to allow new, more effective structures or institutions to replace them.

In his own words, Davis claims,

I would stress the importance in human living of that consolidating function. Men cannot live without the imposition of some social, institutional order upon the flux of their experience. Nevertheless, all such orders and their components are relative. In themselves they cannot claim an absolute value or a universal necessity.

To speak of a particular order as relative does not mean that it is the product of individual or group caprice. A good social order will be the result of creative intelligence and freedom, and designed both to increase the quality of human living and to release and foster the drive toward transcendence. But none of this makes the order with its prescriptions an unchanging absolute.

This brings me to one of the most persistent and perhaps deadliest of the temptations of religion, the temptation I am calling the anger of morality.

By this I mean the insistence upon an established pattern of behavior and thought for its own sake, so that it loses its mediatory quality and becomes a closed order as an end in itself. I call it anger, because psychologically the attitude I am describing would seem to be a hostile reaction that chokes love, a bitter rejection of what is free and does not conform, the sharp repulsion of anything that disturbs or threatens an enclosed self.

Since the established pattern that may be angrily insisted upon is threefold, namely, ritual, ethical, and doctrinal, we find three similar forms of distortion. These are familiar to us as ritualism (in a pejorative sense), legalism, and dogmatism. All three manifest the same fundamental failing, that is, a restrictive insistence upon a particular institutional order, so that instead of facilitating the movement of men toward self-transcendence, it becomes a rigid framework that imprisons them. Here, however, I want to direct my attention to the working of this temptation in the area of moral values and conduct. Hence I have called it the anger of morality. But there should be no difficulty in applying my remarks to the other two areas.

The anger of morality is more than the periodic inertia that defends an obsolete system and resists change. An underlying factor is the human fear of freedom, of love, and of self-transcendence. That fear can turn with hatred as well as anger upon those who manifest an openness one is afraid to allow oneself. It is the personal repression of self-transcendence that leads people to seize upon an institutional order as an instrument for suppressing the feared drive in others. Law and order becomes the cry of the repressed against the free.

Rosemary Haughton, in her book *Love*, shows in some detail how the organization of human life so often suppresses love, a word she uses in the sense of the self-giving form of the drive for self-transcendence. In writing

of child-rearing, which after all is the process of socialization and thus shows the working of the social order, she says: "In fact the study of child care, both in the past and present, is largely a study of the restriction or suppression of love." Men fear the openness, the self-transcendence, the self-giving of love, and this fear often cripples the mediatory function of their institutions and of the code of behavior these demand.

The anger of morality is a temptation for every social order and institution, even those making no explicit appeal to religion. It appears as the failure to recognize the inadequacy of any particular institutional order in relation to reality and human experience as a whole. Man is taken as made for the law, instead of the law as being made for man. Any movement that cannot be contained within the established order is feared and suppressed.

But distinctively religious institutions are subject to more virulent forms of the temptation. Because of their direct concern with the transcendent absolute, when they turn in upon themselves, lose their openness and mediatory capacity and become closed institutions, they fall into a self-idolatry and claim an absolute value for themselves. They do so in effect if not in words. The consolidating function of the religious system in sustaining a stable, meaningful order is no longer complemented by its function of promoting the human drive beyond every limited order to reality and truth as transcendent. Why? Because the religious system cannot bear to be itself surpassed and relativized. Hence the order ceases to mediate and becomes so much dead weight.

Temptations of Religion, Charles Davis, p. 79F.

Charles Davis points out how religion in its respective forms claims finality, absoluteness. The institutional leadership makes the claim and shapes the mind set of the people forming in them a sense of the ultimacy of the respective religious traditions in their doctrine, their forms of worship and their moral code. Institutional strength and solidarity is sought by claiming absolute truth and absolute practice in devotion and life.

Conformity to belief and practice is not left to persuasion and freely offered response; means of enforcement are developed and, where the system is challenged or appears vulnerable, coercion is applied. A movement that begins in spiritual explosion resulting from fresh vision and is marked by confidence, freedom, and joy moves toward normality and then sterility, and at each stage the demand for conformity increases and coercion comes into play.

That's a view from the institutional perspective. But, why do so many passively conform for so long? In other words, why do people put up with institutional coercion?

Is it because we prefer order and predictability in our lives that are chaotic enough without too much freedom and openness in our lives? I think this is particularly true in the area of our concern - in our religious experience. I think it is safe to say that in no other area of life has the human creature been so passive, so conforming as in religious belief and practice.

The institutional leadership has cultivated in the people an unthinking passivity and the people have traded a vital personal faith perspective for the ease and comfort of certainty.

The problem is, of course, that such absolute certainty is a false certainty, for it is the very essence of human historical existence that absolute truth and absolute certainty are denied us. There is no possibility of anything more than a relative apprehension, always provisional, always tentative, always open to revision, of the Absolute, of the transcendent Mystery.

But, that is not what we have been told. Rather, the respective religious traditions - some at least and ours certainly - have claimed absoluteness and played to the human lust for certitude.

In these messages I have been repeating again and again my understanding of religion as a human construction. It is response to genuine encounter, but the response is a human creation, which means precisely that it is not to be identified with absoluteness that is to turn it into idolatry.

Someone sent me a copy of an article that appeared recently in a hyper-Calvinist publication showing that my "heresy" stems from my failure to take the Bible, in the words of the Belgic Confession, as being "most perfect and complete in all respects." The author went on to claim "that the Bible is the infallible and complete written record of God's revelation in Christ to His people." The article was appropriately entitled "God's Way ... Or No Way." There was not enough self-awareness or humility to acknowledge that "God's Way" is not the same as our limited human groping after truth that will always fall short in our attempts to reduce it to our little systems.

Karen Armstrong's in-depth study of 4000 years of the history of God provides a much broader perspective. She recognizes the creative role of human imagination in the forming of images of God, symbolic language that points beyond itself to the Mystery. And she views the present time as a time of transition when old metaphors have lost their power and new symbols are trying to emerge.

She pointed to the English poet John Keats who spoke of the poet's waiting in the darkness for the poem to write itself. This capacity to wait while the image was forming he called "negative capability ... [being] capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

According to Karen Armstrong, that is where we are in the present cultural milieu - waiting, but not anxious, as though we had to protect God or preserve a religious system. Newness will emerge; in the meantime, we trust.

I was delighted to find in Kathleen Norris' recent book, *The Cloister Walk*, a chapter entitled "Exile, Homeland, and Negative Capability." The citation above about negative capability was at the head of the chapter. In this chapter, she speaks of going into elementary classrooms to read poetry and to stimulate the children to write. Interestingly, she noted that the good students did not generally do well with this endeavor in creative writing, but often the traditionally poorer students who did not function well in the ordered disciplines showed great creativity and entered more happily into the exercise. Norris writes,

Metaphor has been so degraded in our culture that it may be difficult for people to conceive of worship as a "metaphoric exchange." But as a poet, I am willing to explore the implications. How would it change our understanding of worship if, from the time they were small, children were taught to value and explore the possibilities of Keat's "negative capability" in themselves? They might better understand faith as a process and church tradition as not only relevant but strikingly alive.

It is worship, she contends, that gives rise to theological reflection, and not the other way around, and if this is understood, then on the analogy of writing a poem, we would see "that one might grow into faith much as one writes a poem. It takes time, patience, discipline, a listening heart. There is precious little certainty, and often great struggling, but also joy in our discoveries." Again, analogous to birthing a poem, one must not settle for a false certitude but embrace ambiguity and mystery.

If the Church had had more of such an understanding - God as mystery, the ambiguity of human experience, the struggle for insight, the walls of faith as a process, the people would have been shaped with a different mind and heart, would have developed patience in the quest for God and compassion with their fellow pilgrims on journey to the Holy City.

Instead, the religious institutions have been marked by arrogant claims to absoluteness, oppressive methods of requiring conformity, coercive means to eliminate spontaneity and freedom, and, consequently, utterly failed to create space for the freedom of the Spirit's brooding ministry.

Pressure to conform, coercion used against the one who fails to comply - all of this creates rather a spirit of fear, suspicion, and anger.

Within the biblical witness there are protests against the angry spirit that battles against an inclusive and compassionate spirit.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Jonah is the classic text condemning a narrow exclusionary spirit and calling for compassion.

The story is in the form of parable - Jonah is called by God to go to the great ancient city of Nineveh, a center of wickedness, according to the story. Jonah is to preach repentance lest God visit the city with judgment.

Jonah wants nothing of such an assignment. He cares not whether Nineveh is scorched; in fact, he would rather have it that way. Should he preach and bring repentance, he senses God would spare them and, in all honesty, he would rather they be damned.

So he boards a boat sailing on the opposite direction. Well, you know the story; a storm arises. The ancient thinking said God must be angry because of someone on board. Jonah acknowledges it is he; he is fleeing God's command. So, overboard he goes; the storm ceases; the boat and crew are safe.

But, what of Jonah? A watery grave? No. He is swallowed by a great fish and survives being there for three days and three nights after which the fish spews Jonah on to dry land: Nineveh after all.

He goes. He preaches God's word. Nineveh heeds, repents, and is spared. Ah, just as he thought - God's compassion will spare this alien people when everything in Jonah was saying - "God, damn them!" God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Can you celebrate that, Jonah? Your preaching made a difference. The people are turning to God and God is full of mercy.

No, not so. We read, rather, "But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." He badgers the Lord. See! This is just what I expected! That's why I fled to Tarshish in the first place because,

"I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ..."

Jonah was so depressed by the wideness of God's mercy that he wanted to die.

But, God is not done with this prophet for this story is not about Nineveh, but about Jonah and the spirit Jonah represented - a narrow exclusionary spirit that resented the mercy of God flowing beyond the narrow limits of Israel. So, God queries, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

No answer.

Jonah heads for the hills to watch the drama unfold. He sat under a leafy booth he made to protect him from the burning sun. Waiting in the shade, there grew

above him a marvelous bush that provided even better cover. Jonah was pleased - very comfortable. But, the next day the Lord sent a worm that killed the bush as quickly as it had grown. And, you guessed it - Jonah was angry.

Once again, he wanted to die.

Now it was time for the lesson - God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?"

Yes!

But, Jonah, you didn't have anything to do with the growth or development of the bush, which was here today and gone tomorrow; yet you grieve its loss. How should I feel about this great city of Nineveh - all the people and the animals?

The parable makes its point - about as poignantly as the one Jesus told of a father with two sons - I need not rehearse the parable - only to say that when the prodigal returns from his fling in the far country, he is received graciously by the Father who throws a party. The elder brother reflects precisely the bitter spirit we just saw in Jonah. Jesus says, " ... he became angry and refused to go in."

Think about it: Jonah, a parable in the Hebrew scripture that reveals the ugliness of an exclusive spirit that really does not want God's mercy to be experienced by all, that is really angry that others who are different - in race, culture, ethnicity, creedal commitment or whatever are also loved by God.

The parable Jesus told exposing the naked face of resentment that God's grace is not a matter of performance, of merit, but offered to any open to receive it.

What is operative here? Is it not perhaps a religion of obligation grudgingly practiced for fear that failing to do so would hold negative consequences now and eternally? Anger is seen to arise when the absolute certainty of one's creed and practice is relativized; Anger is present when one views his religious obligation as an onerous task which he resents - and then sees some other one invited to the party while never having "put in his time."

Lust for certitude that is not possible. Resentment at a grace that is offered apart from performance. There may be more operative in the anger present in much religion but these two causes are quite obviously major factors. What a pity.

How many good people, sincere and well meaning, have not been crippled by an angry spirit because they were never told honestly that their religious system is relatively effective, not the one and only absolute way. They've been told their beliefs and practices "fall out of heaven" unmediated by human imagination and construction.

Further, they have never been allowed a glimpse of the wideness of God's mercy that will never be denied, never exposed to a grace irresistible that will never give up on the human family, all of whom are sisters and brothers because all the children of the God Who is Mystery, Who is Love.

References:

Charles Davis. *Temptations of Religion*. Harper & Row, 1974.