

# Do I Need Religion?

From the series: Can I Honestly Believe?

*Text: Psalm 8:1; Psalm 42:2; Acts 17:22*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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I announced a summer series in a recent Courier entitled *With Heart and Mind United*. I cited a sermon from 1984 with that theme. In that sermon, I pointed back to my return to this congregation in 1971 when we determined to be a congregation marked by intellectual integrity and evangelical passion. We have been on such an adventure of faith now for over twenty-seven years. When I determined the series theme for this summer, it was not a case of conscious recycling; rather, it was a determination to do once again what we have been engaged in over all these years - to understand the faith we profess and live, to bring our experience of God, of the sacred, the Holy, into connection with the whole reality of our human experience. Working over that theme, I have named the series *Can I Honestly Believe?* By that I mean, can I as a person at the end of the twentieth century, aware of the universe of which I am a part, still believe in God as Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is, to paraphrase St. Paul?

Faith, religious awe, worship and devotional practices arise from our depths, not from rational analysis; we will never by exercise of our reason be able fully to explain the human experiences of the Mystery we call God.

In a 1917 classic study of religion, Rudolf Otto wrote on the idea of the Holy, the description of the experience of the Holy or a God as the *ganz andere*, the wholly Other, that mystery beyond that breaks through to us but, breaking through to us, making us unalterably aware of the reality in the presence, remains the hidden one, the hidden mystery. The religious experience, Otto describes very, very wonderfully when he says, it is

... the feeling that remains where the concept fails.

It is an experience that transcends the possibility of conceptualizing it, articulating it, putting it into idea form.

But, put it into idea form, we will. We seem to have to do that. We will try to understand. The understanding is never the same as the experience in itself, but

being human as we are, rational creatures, reflective, self-conscious, we will inevitably think about and seek to bring to expression at least in some symbolic form that which will point beyond itself to the experience that has broken in upon us. That seems to be the universal human experience, and that is the origin of religion.

Religion has at least these three basic components: There is that which is believed, or the *doctrine*. There is the mode of worship, devotion, practice, the *ritual*, the *liturgy*, which seeks to be an expression, an action that gives expression to the idea. And then, there is the drawing out of the implications of the experience for daily living, or *ethics*. So, doctrine or theology, cult or worship, ethics or morality - that's the nature of human religion.

I have said this before a number of times, but I'm going to say it again until you wake up in the middle of the night and repeat it to yourself - religion is a human, creative construction. Religions don't fall out of heaven full-blown. We make them up. Not arbitrarily or capriciously, but we make them up in response to the *in-breaking of the sacred or the Holy or God*, the experience that is still there when the concept fails, but the experience that drives us to seek to articulate the nature of it. We construct our human religion in response to the in-breaking of the mystery that is God.

Therefore, and this is critical, the knowledge of the world, the universe, the human being and society, in a word – the worldview, because it provides the framework of human religion and will from time to time move beyond an earlier understanding, will leave the religious structure, imagery and symbol with a framework that no longer makes sense.

For a time the religious community will do a translation - the three-storied universe -

heaven

earth

hell

is translated into modern cosmology with meanings spiritualized.

But, at some point, a symbol system breaks down and it no longer speaks, it can no longer point beyond itself to the Ultimate. Then one must decide - either to chuck religion as nonsense, or to recognize that an outmoded structure does not spell the death of God.

Edward O. Wilson, in his recently published book, *Consilience*, talks about his experience as a good Southern Baptist lad who went through the evangelical experience of conversion and all the rest, but having a curious mind from the

beginning, eventually went off to school where he says, "I chose to doubt." Then, in his distinguished career as a biologist who recognized the place of religion in people's lives, he recognized the importance of religion in giving orientation, in giving meaning, significance to life, and so forth. But he also recognized that he was one person who could not continue to understand reality as continually being unfolded in our presence before the pursuit of the natural scientist and still somehow or other believe that there was a literal anchoring of conceptuality back 2000 or 3000 years. He refused to believe that the final revelation of God was put in stone by an agricultural culture 2000 years ago at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. He experienced cognitive dissonance.

Wilson raises the interesting question whether science, the examination and exploration of reality, may not be a continuation of "Holy Writ," only on better tested ground. He suggests the data of scientific investigation may play the role that once revelation played in religion - satisfying the religious hunger to know one's place in the universe.

So far, the theory of everything has eluded even the great intellects of an Einstein and a Hawking. And if one day the unity of knowledge becomes a reality, even then one will have to choose whether or not behind it is still the Mystery that manifests itself, yet remains hidden.

The questions we will be asking this summer are questions that arise because our religious system, its imagery, symbol and conceptuality derives from another time, based on an outmoded worldview. Therefore, in Wilson's terms, there is widespread cognitive dissonance.

Many have simply given up religious faith. Some of us struggle to bring religious experience into meaningful conversation with our present knowledge of the world.

That is my challenge for this summer season. But, the question arises: Do I need it?

- Not if my religious practice was only a way to please a God Who might condemn me to eternal punishment.

- Not if I practice religious devotion just to cover the bases, just in case ...

I read last night again *The Grand Inquisitor*, by Dostoevsky. Chilling, chilling! Jesus appears in Seville, Spain, during the time of the Inquisition. They had just burned 100 heretics at the stake and Jesus appears before a crowd of people and the Cardinal, the church ecclesiast, sees him, has him thrown into jail, then goes to speak with him, and tells him how the freedom of which Jesus spoke and for which he gave his life cannot be handled by the people. The people need authority. They live by miracle, mystery, and authority. Let them submit. Let them be slaves, simply obedient, unthinking. Give them bread. That's what the

masses need, not the freedom of spirit of which Jesus spoke and incarnated. And then the Cardinal says, after Jesus refuses to respond, but only arises and plants a kiss on the wizened old face, the Cardinal says, "Get out! Get out and never return!"

Well, we don't need a lot more of that religion, even though there's a lot of it alive and well on Planet Earth. But, do we need it? No. No, not absolutely. But, I think that there's a loss without it. There's a loss to our humanity and a loss to world community.

The scripture lessons were read to indicate different experiences of God. I'm used to watching the sunset. It's been magnificent, but Friday morning I had to take Nancy to the airport early and I caught a sunrise. Huge, flaming globe just over the horizon. I said, "My goodness, it comes up like it goes down!" I'm not a morning person, but the sunset or the moon, the stars say, "O Lord, our Lord, how magnificent is your name in all of the earth. When I consider the stars, the moon, the wonder of it all, I say how small am I." The sense of humility and smallness before the vastness, the wonder of the world. But, I am a little less than God! How can I give expression to that in a secular fashion? What if I can't sing? What if I have no song, no songwriter, and no one to whom to sing? Or, in life's anxieties and depression, the hunger for God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Or, like Isaiah, to come someday and to have the place filled with smoke and to hear the rumbling and to be encountered by the mystery, the fascinating and terrorizing mystery and to feel one's own guilt and uncleanness and unworthiness, and then to hear the word, "You're cleansed. Your sin is forgiven." And to be commissioned to significant living and service.

You don't *need* religion. But I believe that to fail seriously to engage, to practice, to be observant is a very great loss and leads to a truncated human experience and a distortion of all that we're intended to be.

Paul said to the Athenians, "You're really religious. There's an idol to an unknown God just in case you missed one." I don't need that kind of religion. But, yesterday I had the privilege of being invited to the Bar Mitzvah of the son, David, of Rabbi Alan and Anna Alpert, and in that Jewish community again, on Bar Mitzvah day, which is high celebration, I felt the warmth, I felt the solidity of family and of community. I regret that I wasn't born Jewish because it's not like being born a Christian where you have to keep worrying about becoming one, where you have to get converted, you have to keep wondering if you're in or out. A Jew is just a Jew! Can't do anything about it. So, they celebrate, and those who are observant, who are serious, celebrate it in wonderful warmth of community. And there's something more there than just good friends and family ties. It is in the presence of a Mystery that here and there, now and again, has broken in upon us, creating awe, wonder, gratitude, drawing forth worship, enhancing our humanity and nudging us toward the things that make for peace.

You don't really need it, but you'll miss a lot if you don't have it.

## APPENDIX

. . . I found it a wonderful feeling not just to taste the unification metaphysics but also to be released from the confinement of fundamentalist religion. I had been raised a Southern Baptist, laid backward under the water on the sturdy arm of a pastor, been born again. I knew the healing power of redemption. Faith, hope, and charity were in my bones, and with millions of others I knew that my savior Jesus Christ would grant me eternal life. More pious than the average teenager, I read the Bible cover to cover, twice. But now at college, steroid-driven into moods of adolescent rebellion, I chose to doubt. I found it hard to accept that our deepest beliefs were set in stone by agricultural societies of the eastern Mediterranean more than two thousand years ago. I suffered cognitive dissonance between the cheerfully reported genocidal wars of these people and Christian civilization in 1940s Alabama. It seemed to me that the Book of Revelation might be black magic hallucinated by an ancient primitive. And I thought, surely a loving personal God, if He is paying attention, will not abandon those who reject the literal interpretation of the biblical cosmology. It is only fair to award points for intellectual courage. Better damned with Plato and Bacon, Shelly said, than go to heaven with Paley and Malthus. But most of all, Baptist theology made no provision for *evolution*. The biblical authors had missed the most important revelation of all! Could it be that they were not really privy to the thoughts of God? Might the pastors of my childhood, good and loving men though they were, be mistaken? It was all too much, and freedom was ever so sweet. I drifted away from the church, not definitively agnostic or atheistic, just Baptist no more.

Still, I had no desire to purge religious feelings. They were bred in me; they suffused the wellsprings of my creative life. I also retained a small measure of common sense. To wit, people must belong to a tribe; they yearn to have a purpose larger than themselves. We are obliged by the deepest drives of the human spirit to make ourselves more than animated dust, and we must have a story to tell about where we came from, and why we are here. Could Holy Writ be just the first literate attempt to explain the universe and make ourselves significant within it? Perhaps science is a continuation on new and better-tested ground to attain the same end. If so, then in that sense science is religion liberated and writ large.

Such, I believe, is the source of the Ionian Enchantment: Preferring a search for objective reality over revelation is another way of satisfying religious hunger. It is an endeavor almost as old as civilization and intertwined with traditional religion, but it follows a very different course — a stoic's creed, an acquired taste, a guidebook to adventure plotted across rough terrain. It aims to save the spirit, not by surrender but by liberation of the human mind. Its central tenet, as Einstein knew, is the

unification of knowledge. When we have unified enough certain knowledge, we will understand who we are and why we are here.

If those committed to the quest fail, they will be forgiven. When lost, they will find another way. The moral imperative of humanism is the endeavor alone, whether successful or not, provided the effort is honorable and failure memorable. The ancient Greeks expressed the idea in a myth of vaulting ambition. Daedalus escapes from Crete with his son Icarus on wings he has fashioned from feathers and wax. Ignoring the warnings of his father, Icarus flies toward the sun, whereupon his wings come apart and he falls into the sea. That is the end of Icarus in the myth. But we are left to wonder: Was he just a foolish boy? Did he pay the price for *hubris*, for pride in sight of the gods? I like to think that, on the contrary, his daring represents a saving human grace. And so the great astrophysicist Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar could pay tribute to the spirit of his mentor, Sir Arthur Eddington, by saying: Let us see how high we can fly before the sun melts the wax in our wings.

Edward O. Wilson. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. Vintage, first edition, 1999.