

Religion as Illusion

From the series: Religion: Significant Critique and Fresh Expression

Text: Isaiah 43:3; Ephesians 4:13; Matthew 6:3

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I have within reach of my desk chair a volume of *The New York Times Magazine* of some three years ago which has a bright red cover and big letters in black about God. It is about the God question, and there is article after article about the quest for God in all of the respective forms of that quest and the various religious traditions, as well as within our own country and within our own Christian faith.

There is an interesting piece by Jack Miles. Jack Miles wrote the book, *God: A Biography*, which some of you perhaps read within the last two or three years. Jack Miles writes about the resurgence of religion and he says that what is happening is the dealing with questions that have been postponed too long, questions that finally cannot be put off, questions about the ultimate meaning of life. He makes a couple of points that are fascinating to me because I suppose one always likes to have one's own biases confirmed, but we have been talking a lot here about religion as a human construct, as a response to the mystery that is God, and Jack Miles says very clearly that the resurgence of religion involves not fascination with the mystery of religion, but with the mystery in response to which the religions arise. In other words, the resurgence of religion is a serious quest for God, or for the holy, the sacred, the ultimate. The religions are response. They involve all of the dimensions of that quest that seriously hungers and thirsts after the knowledge and the experience of God.

He says one other thing that pleases me very much and that is, in order for religion to have broad social viability, it needs to have established its intellectual viability, at least by a few. The social viability for the many depends upon the establishment of the intellectual viability of religion by the few. He recognizes that there are only a few that have the interest, the fascination, the patience and the preparation to investigate the intellectual foundations of religious expression, religious faith. But, he makes the point that those few are very critical for the larger practice of religion because ideas count, ideas make a difference, ideas trickle down and shape the large majority of the population eventually, and therefore, it is critical that someone somewhere, that some people somewhere engage in a serious investigation about the intellectual viability of religious faith,

and we do that here. We do it here seriously and it cannot be engaged in, it cannot be executed for us today without our going through the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century lie the roots of modern atheism and we have been looking at some of those brilliant thinkers who were atheistic in their posture and who were often anti-religious, believing that religion had to be jettisoned in order for humanity to grow up. It seems as though Ludwig Feuerbach had this idea whose time had come, the idea that God is a human projection, that our own self-transcendent capacity, our ability to step out of our skin and observe ourselves was simply absolutized and projected into heaven. What we really worship is a human projection. God is the ideal of our humanity to the extent that we are able to conceive it.

Karl Marx took that idea and said religion is wishful thinking, it is consolation, it is a narcotic for the oppressed multitudes. "Religion," he said famously, "is the opium of the people." He was not severely critical of that, except that he said to the extent that religion dulls human awareness of suffering, of injustice, of what is wrong with this world. To that extent it keeps us from dealing with that wrong here and now. He saw the religious structuring as creating another world in which everything would be all right, all the wrongs would be righted and we'd finally have peace and satisfaction. So, Marx believed that to the extent that religion was a narcotic to dull us to the present, it allowed us to focus on another world, keeping us from dealing with that which had to be dealt with in order to transform the world and to bring about a just society.

Sigmund Freud followed in the steps of Feuerbach, as did Marx, simply accepting the idea that God was a projection. There is no God "out there," so to speak, that there is no objective reality. Freud saw religion as illusion, as the consequence of our oldest, strongest, most urgent wishes, our human wish for security, for justice, for the prolongation of earthly life, for the future life. The oldest, strongest, most urgent wishes of humankind he saw as the seedbed of religion. He had it all mixed up with the Oedipal complex and the fact that the experience of the human race could be seen in the experience of a child, the helplessness of a child, the need for protection, looking to the father, the authority figure who is both loved and feared. The father, then, and the experience of the child, becomes the God figure that is projected outward, but, essentially, it is wish fulfillment, living by illusion. Illusion is not the same as error because the religious hopes and dreams cannot be demonstrated to be true, but they cannot be refuted, either. They are illusions; they are unfounded beliefs by which humankind lives in order to find comfort and to have hope and courage. Religion as illusion.

Well, what will we say to that? In the first place, I suppose we have to recognize that much of what Freud said was true. Freud is the father of psychoanalysis, but probably also the one that made psychology in general a household word. Freud was a brilliant thinker, a careful analyzer of the human psyche. He is the one we

look to as the one who uncovered that underground river of the unconscious which so powerfully influences what we think and what we do. There are so many insights that came through Freud that I'm not competent nor would I begin to try to give a synopsis of his thought, but he gave us brilliant insight into the human psyche and it was his conviction that our religious faith and practice is a childhood fantasy carried into our adulthood and that our religion is simply illusion. As I immersed myself again in these 19th century thinkers, I am impressed with the fact that they are brilliant. They are a century after the breakthrough in the natural sciences. The world was opening up; reality was opening up, and they brought to light scintillating insight.

As I reflect on them in the light of my own education and training, my own nurture and upbringing, I realize what a tragedy it is that there was such an adversarial relationship between these 19th century thinkers and the Church. I suppose it was inevitable. It is probably a case of the chicken and the egg. I don't know if they were so nasty that the Church got its back up, or if they were so threatening that the Church became nasty. It may well have been the latter. But, as I see that history, I realize how much we have lost by being at enmity with some of the most brilliant thinkers of the past century. They were atheist and I think they believed that they had to be that and against religion to one degree or another, because only thus could they get the cobwebs out of our human minds and hearts so that we might grow up to come to maturity, that we might face the real world that was coming more and more to light. But, in that adversarial relationship between the Church and science, the Church and the human sciences, we lost a great deal.

I saw a TV ad yesterday for Gore against Bush in which he had George Bush with a background of Houston, the smog capital of the world, and George Bush looks for all the world like he is hung over, and I said to myself, "How too bad." Of course, that's the real situation. They slug at one another and put each other down and do their best to make each other look ridiculous, but how unfortunate that that is the only way that we, the electorate, can be appealed to. There is no civil dialogue, no civil discourse, no setting forth of issues that are discussed intelligently, but rather, the other is made to look like some kind of a fool, and I thought about the way Dr. Freud was portrayed to me in my own education. He was really a bad man, a rotten man. He was really a reason why religion was in deep trouble because of his terrible threat, because of his thinking, because of his ideas. I so wish that someone at some point would have sat me down and said, "Look at the brilliant insights that are coming to light. If you could only hear them," because there is much religious expression that is illusion and there are an awful lot of people who cling to religion as a crutch in their weakness, their insecurity.

There is an awful lot of lack of reality in religious expression in the Christian Church as well as other religions. Only when one comes to acknowledge that and understand that is one going to be able to put religion on a more sure foundation

in light of the modern world. We have still in the traditional, classical paradigm of Christian faith, not come to terms with the knowledge that has come to light in the last two and a half centuries, and the critique of religion that has come forth in the nineteenth century is a significant critique that uncovered great weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the intellectual understanding of the faith, which in turn has its repercussions in practice and in life. What a shame that in the Church we have not had enough confidence to hear the critique that could open up to us new questions that could give us a new understanding and greater confidence in the expression of our faith and practice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who took in, absorbed all of this trained development of thought of the 19th century and into the early 20th century and who, in his brilliant mind, able to assimilate all of that, got himself into a situation where, of course, he was arrested because of his conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, finds himself in jail, in prison thinking the faith. His *Letters and Papers From Prison* are a spiritual gem, a document that can keep one engaged for a long, long time. I have given you some citations in the back of your liturgy for your meditation this afternoon. But, what I love about Bonhoeffer is that, having taken in all of the critique of religion, he was able to admit to much of it. He spoke of man come of age; that was his classic phrase. He spoke of God being edged more and more out of this world in terms of the explanation for how things work. He acknowledged the present situation without arguing with it or trying to refute it. He said, "This is it. Now what will we do?"

And he began to think about how Christ could be meaningful even to those who were without faith in God. He asked questions about religionless Christianity, what would it look like? And this I love, he said, "I want to confront people in their strength. I don't want to take rather healthy, well-adjusted, somewhat affluent people who are getting along just fine and try to convince them how miserable they are so that I can give them a Gospel pill to make them better." He said that is unworthy of the Gospel. Let us confront the human person at his or her very strength, with God. How does one encounter those who are doing just fine, thank you, those who are reasonably well-adjusted, reasonably happy, reasonably prosperous, doing a good job - how does one convince them that underneath there is a hunger and a restlessness which only the God quest can finally satisfy? How does one present God to people's strength, not to their weakness? How does one look them in the eye and not whine? This was Bonhoeffer's quest. This was the thing that occupied him and he was wrestling with the faith with a great intensity in those days of incarceration.

I thought about Isaiah 43 because Bonhoeffer was certainly going through a dark valley. He must have known the very real possibility that any day his name would be called. But they say that in prison he was a shining light, a source of encouragement, the embodiment of hope, thinking as he was thinking about God and religion in the light of everything that he had understood and studied and become aware of, he was able, nonetheless, when his name was called to say to

his friend, "This is the end, the beginning of life." He could kneel at the hangman's noose and commit his life to God. In other words, his quest, his engagement with the God question was not that which undercut his trust, but it was his trust that enabled him thus to query and to quest. He was able to ask those questions while experiencing what the prophet spoke of as that presence in the midst of the flame, through the rushing river. He was able to live as Jesus pointed us to in that Sermon on the Mount. He was in sync with reality as he understood it; the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, Jesus said, pointing to creation, to be able to be at one with that and to live with trust.

I am not trying to say that Isaiah was not a theist or that Jesus was not a theist, for that matter. I am saying that in their understanding of God they were able to point us to a presence that would be with us, and one of the things that we struggle with in our own day as we try to interpret the faith and translate the faith is how to say God, how to image God, because it is that image of a theistic God, the governor of the universe pulling the gears and turning the wheels, that God "out there" who controls us and pulls the strings, that God that doesn't work for me anymore and for many of us.

It is the re-imagining of that God that is the difficult task. But, it doesn't mean that one has to live without God, for one can believe that if God is God, after all, God will be sufficient for whatever comes. And to think thus and to wrestle thus is not in order finally to have an intellectual answer, but it is finally in order to have peace with God, to have that kind of confident non-anxious living to come, as Paul said, to maturity. Or, as Freud said, to grow up, to move beyond childhood illusions and superstitions and magic, to be able to think deeply and to entertain every idea and concept and every suggestion anywhere with a confident trust that somehow or other there will be a fresh expression. Paul said, "No longer being children tossed about by every wind of doctrine through the cunning and scheming of people like me." Think of Paul. Think of the transformation of Paul. Think of this passionate, deeply traditioned Jew who was able to turn around and to come to a new expression that enabled him to say in the face of Jesus, "My God!"

You see, if we are not afraid, then we can ask the questions, clarify the questions and wait in the darkness if need be for the clearing and for the answer, but all of it is finally that we might rest in the Lord, having the presence through the flood and through the fire, and be able to take the name of the Lord upon our lips with our last breath, to be able to live and to die and to be all right. That is our quest.