

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond
all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a
high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but be-
cause they are
useful. When they become so derivative as to become
unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
do not admire what we cannot understand: the bat
holding on upside down or in quest of something to
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse
that feels a flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician –
nor is it valid
to discriminate against ‘business documents and
school-books’; all these phenomena are important. One
must make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half-poets,
the result is not poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be
‘literalists of
the imagination’ – above
insolence and triviality and can present
for inspection, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’,
shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

RELIGION . . . I, TOO, DISLIKE IT

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, September 12, 2004
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Religion. I, too, dislike it. There are things that are important beyond all this fiddle. Preaching it, however, living it, even with a certain contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine. Hands that can help, lips that can pray, spirits that can rise and sing if they have to. These things are important not because a high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us: that we do not admire what we cannot understand: the hermit perched on a pillar in the desert, or wandering the earth, terrorizing in the name of God; predatory priests or preachers on TV; the immovable cynic who twitches his nose like an left-wing literalist reading the Bible; the sectarian fanatic, the church statistician – nor is it valid to discriminate against ‘pledge cards and Sunday School books’; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction, however: when dragged into prominence by the half-faithless, the result is not always religion; nor until the faithful among us can be ‘doers of the word and not hearers only’ – beyond self-righteousness and triviality and can present for inspection ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’ among toads like us, shall we have it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand the raw material of spiritual life in all of its rawness, and that which on the other hand endures as genuine and holy, then you are interested in religion.

The world, they say, is divided into two kinds of people: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who do not! There’s good religion and bad, some think. I’m not so sure. I just notice that how people use the word has changed. Negative connotations have overtaken the positive. Years ago people coming to congregations like this would say, “I’m not an orthodox believer, but I *am* religious.’ Now they often say, “I’m not religious, but I do want to have a spiritual life, for myself and my family.’

“There’s no such thing as poetry,” said William Carlos Williams, rebuking Miss Moore, “there are only poems.” And philosopher John Dewey took a parallel position, declaring

there is no such thing as 'religion' – there are only variously religious human beings. Who all have a religion, says my friend Forrest Church, whether we admit to one or not. Religion is “our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Universally. So “it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read,” as Jefferson said. Yet at some levels, the abstractions poetry and religion begin and end similarly. “Poetry,” said Robert Frost, “starts with a lump in the throat.” And so does genuine religious feeling. With awe-struck gratitude, even in the midst of grief; with a sense of the transcendent, the ineffable, the Holy, the numinous, deeper than all naming -- pointing to the fearful yet fascinating beauty at the core of existence.

One summer night, chatting away with friends in the backyard, waxing angry about the state of the world, my friend Clark Dewey Wells felt his four-year old son tug at his shirt and point upward, at the evening star. “Daddy,” said the boy, “you be glad at that star!”

“The problem of darkness,” wrote George Santayana, “does not exist for someone gazing at the stars. No doubt it is there, fundamental, pervasive, and unconquerable except at pinpoints where the stars twinkle; but the problem is not why there is such darkness, but what is the light that breaks through so remarkably; and granting this light, why we have eyes to see it and hearts to be gladdened.” Recently I sent these words to a friend who is no friend of religion, who spent the summer building an observatory on a hillside next to his country house.

Real religious experience also comes down to earth. It results in deeper humility, a sense of shared creatureliness, and yes, compassion. “The spirit of poetry and high religion are the same,” said Thomas Hardy, “imaginative compassion.”

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established,” sang the psalmist, “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

That religions can then go to become arrogant and divisive often seems an ultimate irony. Yet the psalmist seems to have anticipated even this pridefulness, going on to say, “Yet you have made them a little lower than gods, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

One night, many years ago, my daughters and I were staring at stars on a summer night when Mary suddenly looked up to me and asked, “Daddy, what’s God’s last name?” Now, I was tempted to answer, “Well, Mary, either ‘Almighty’ or ‘Dammit,’ depending on your mood and experience. But I played it safer by saying, “God has many names, Mary; and all of them can be holy.” For the worst tendency in religion, especially in times of conflict, is to claim to have God on my side – rather than worrying, as Lincoln did, whether *we* are on the side of God.

You see, I don’t want to deny the negative side of religion. In fact, I think acknowledging it is essential. The theologian Paul Tillich wrote, “the first word of religion must always be spoken *against* religion.” For it is not just when institutional or organized religion gets too positive that it is positively right that terrible spiritual destruction can result. It’s also when our personal spirituality tends to convince us that we are positively A-okay, fully living up to the positive ideas and high standards of conduct that we hold for everyone.

Last month I read an obituary for Stanley Morgenbesser, philosopher, who died at the age of 93. Having grown up in poverty on the Lower East Side, he was amazed to have been given tenure in his field at Columbia, up on ‘fancy schmantzy’ Morningside Heights. The obit included this anecdote: Once the famous logician, J.L. Austin, gave a guest lecture. British, and a logical positivist, Austin adamantly asserted that philosophy should make its use of language strictly follow the rules of logic inherent in mathematics, in which while two negatives can make a positive, two positive statements can’t make a negative. From the back of the room Stan was heard to mutter loudly, “Yeah! Yeah!”

It’s what I have long found it to be true in religion and spirituality: being too positive, both about your beliefs and your own actions, can indeed be a negative. And not in groups; American individualists do this, too. Preaching the Power of Positive Thinking,

like old Norman Vincent Peale. Adlai Stevenson was once taken to hear him, and, when asked for a comment, replied, “You know, even as a Unitarian I find St. Paul increasingly appealing and St. Peale appalling.” Stevenson knew how to handle the negative I life. When he went to Dallas in ’63, just days before JFK was killed there, he was met by women of the John Birch Society, holding signs saying, “US out of the UN.” Outside his hotel they hit him with those signs, kicked and spit on him, while yelling about God, Jesus, and America. A reporter asked Adlai for a response. “Tell the good people of Texas,” he replied, “I believe in the redemption of ignorance and the forgiveness of sin.”

I often tell newcomers to our religious community that, if they are allergic to organized religion, they have relatively little to fear from us. We’re just not that organized. But we do know that we need one another, lest we think too well of ourselves, in our idealism.

Just this week, for example, at a small gathering of some church leaders, some demon in me brought forth a remark that was just as unnecessary as it was uncharitable. Most present just ignored it. But one courageous soul, bless her heart, just shook her head at me, saying, “I wish you hadn’t said that. That’s not what we try to stand for.” Since she was right, all I could say was, “You’re right. I accept that. My apologies.”

Martin Buber once pointed out that in the Biblical tradition there are two words for faith. In Hebrew, it’s *enumah* – faithfulness in the relational sense; loyalty to the Most High, the highest we know, even when we and our fellow human beings betray the covenants we should keep. In New Testament Greek, however, the word for faith is *pistis*, related to the word *epistle*, or letter; faith understood as belief, with the danger of being concerned more about the letter than the spirit.

Our forebears in this place knew that danger. Instead of focusing on the creedal question, “What do we all believe in common?” Instead they asked more covenantal questions: “What hopes and vision do we share? What promises shall we undertake to one another as we walk together in faithfulness?”

Those who think they “have religion” most are often those who have it least, of course, while those who do not think of themselves as religious at all can be the truly faithful.

In my lexicon, you have religion when you feel the urge to do your spiritual, moral best; and when you fall short, don’t stop and give up. When you quit trying to be the ultimate judge, even of yourself, and accept that there is a Source of freedom, second-chances, and even love that is greater even than your greatest mistake.

You have religion when you have an enduring gratitude for the wonder of human living, including the challenges that have come your way; when you refuse to accept the positive goods of life as an automatic right, and accept that with grace comes responsibility.

You have religion when you look on people with all their terrible capacity for defensiveness, callousness, and self-righteousness, and still see in them another set of possibilities; when you look beyond people to the grandeur of nature, to the poetry of your own heart, and feel inspired you to acquit yourself as a human being, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before the Most High.

You have religion when you shoulder responsibility for the gift of life, care for those around you and who will follow you, when you refuse to accept as final the normal defeats of daily living, and when you rise to meet fear with courage, despair with faith, and indifference with love.

You have religion when you have done all that you can with your finite human strength, and then in confidence entrust the rest to a Life that is larger than your own, whether named or unnamed, to the mysterious order that sustains us all, aware that world is not your task alone and that there is much that will go on long after we have departed the temporal scene, perhaps made better by what we have tried to give back.

Just as the first word of religion must be spoken *against* religion, perhaps the last word should be spoken in its favor. There is a lot of fear masquerading as faith; dogmatic belief

and institutional arrogance in religion that ignores justice, cancels out compassion, and high-jacks humility. I know that. But if there is a second negative in religious living – something akin to a divine discontent, full of critical thinking, about our own lives, both individual and collective, then I believe something positive can emerge. The anti-Nazi pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called for ‘religionless Christianity.’ I dare to call for, more universally, ‘religionless religion.’ Not only socially critical, but also self-critical. Persistently. Faithfully.

Who knows? We might even get over our self-righteousness! We might even inspire one another to create together a way of living together, of being human, religiously, that has in it, after all, a place for the genuine. We might even find a way to make room in each of us for the more positive side of religion – which still consists not so much in right morals, right rituals, or right beliefs as it does in simply seeking to do justice, to love one another in compassion, and to walk more humbly.

Then we’ll glimpse the imaginary garden, the new Eden, even among toads like us.

I love you fellow toads! *Ribbit!* And Amen.