

Chapter 35

The Battle with Dysfunctional Religion

We often speak of dysfunctional families. We need an equally strong word to characterize the deep malady that is taking place in a majority of steeped buildings on the street corners of US neighborhoods and in other such buildings across the world. If accessing profound humanness is the valid function of a vital religion, then most of what takes place in these expensive religious buildings is fostering rather than healing dysfunctional people. We need something better from our religious organizations. If profound humanness is our deepest functionality as human beings, then none of us are fully functional; we are all recovering from a deep form of dysfunctionality. We need help.

We can recognize in ourselves and others the controlling rationalism that takes the place of a trusting relation with Reality that I have described as states of transparent attention, universal forgiveness, and effortless letting be. Dysfunctional religion with its promotion of authoritarian doctrines is not helping us.

We can recognize in ourselves and others the binding moralism that takes the place of the deep freedom that I have described as states of primal merging, inherent purity, and attuned working. Dysfunctional religion with its promotion of moral rigidities is not helping us.

We can recognize in ourselves and others the self-serving malice that takes the place of the essential love that I have described as states of autonomous strength, enchantment with Being, and out-flowing compassion. Dysfunctional religion with its promotion of distracting sentimentalities is not helping us.

About Rationalism

No Scripture or Bishop or ecclesiastical office can claim final authority on what is so about Final Things. Each of us has to discover profound humanness for ourselves. Unless we have the personal authority of being able to speak of what we deeply know in our own being, any religious teaching is useless. It is worse than useless; it is a pretense of wisdom that will eventually carry us into some pit of despair. Authoritative religion swallowed by gullible sheep is killing people in the most sensitive dimension of their existence. Such religious practices turn needy and willing learners into fully stupid people.

About Moralism

What are we to make of people who hate everyone who does not accept their exact religious beliefs or cotton to their moral teachings? What are we to make of those who burn Korans; shame Jews; insist that women use no contraceptives and never opt for an abortion; and a thousand other sectarian, moralistically rigid ravings? What are we to make of the justification of inordinate wealth while pouring contempt on the poverty stricken and disadvantaged portion of our human family? What are we to make of angry proposals of economic and social practices that mistreat and demean large swaths of the population?

About Sentimentality

These is something very shallow about the too often heard saying, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." Nice is a shallow and malicious standard that is self-critical and critical of others. It is not kind to be nice. Nice is closer to hate than love. Nice is hatred toward our own feelings of anger and resentment. Nice is fearful

and guilt-ridden toward speaking and acting realistically toward and among others. Nice is very far from love in the profound humanness sense. And this profound love is not a feeling of affection. To view love as pleasant feelings is a sentimental and selfish attitude. Fear likewise is a holy feeling that can attend holy love. To deny and suppress our fear is another form of malice. With courage we can act compassionately in spite of our fear. Fear is just a holy signal from our bodies that danger is at hand. In realism we can respect fear without using it as an excuse for inaction. True love is a courageous thing that overcomes fear in the sense of acting in spite of it. Sentimentality in our religious communities forces us into superficiality and discourages us from acting for realistic social justice.

These three structures of escape from profound humanness catch all of us in their subtle nets. To the extent that we notice how we ourselves have been caught in these patterns, we begin to understand what is going on in the lives of the dysfunctionally religious across the globe. Humanity is called by Reality to sober up – to give up the rational-security opiates, the moralistic-certitude stimulants, and the sentimentality potions that drown us in their sticky goo. Love of self and others is not a web of syrupy feelings. Love of self and others is a willingness to “let be” the full spectrum of life that characterizes each human being. When our profound humanity is restored, we experience a type of relief and joy, because such healing means taking leave of the despair-producing effort it takes to not be who we deeply are. Rest in being the Being that we are posited to Be by the Power that posits us is a peace that is beyond understanding and the joy unspeakable.

We the universal league of profound humanness are called by the reality of our own integrity to fight dysfunctional religion. Whatever our heritage of religious practice or lack of a religious practice, we who are the universal league of profound humanness are called to a life-and-death battle with dysfunctional religion, every dysfunctional religion, not just expressions of the religion we happen to practice. We need to say this imperative loudly to ourselves because our culture does not fully understand that dysfunctional religion must be corrected. The social process of religion are just as important (perhaps even more important) than processes of education or economics or politics. If our religious processes are dysfunctional, the entire society suffers dysfunctionality.

The universal league is precisely that part of a human society that knows the power of religious practices for good or for ill. The universal league are those who know the ruin that can be wrought by the sick religions that so many of us have already abandoned. This league of profound humanness is called by their own deep integrity to awaken the masses to the horror of dysfunctional religion. Here is the prophet Amos showing us the attitude to take: Speaking for the Final Reality, Amos said: “I hate, I spurn your pilgrim feasts; I will not delight in your sacred ceremonies. When you present your sacrifices and offerings I will not accept them, nor look on the buffaloes of your shared offerings. Spare me the sound of your songs; I cannot endure the music of your lutes. Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”¹

Such a stern demand for change delivered to our religious institutions is surely as needed today as it was in Amos’ day. And religion deserves stern demands for correction, like any other social process of our societies. We make a mistake when we dismiss these dysfunctional bodies as irrelevant and not worth our time and concern. They are a pattern of living that cries out to be healed, defeated, or sidelined. Their members need to be called upon to repent and be healed of their sicknesses. And we need to take pity on the somewhat innocent sheep who are being gathered into these evil kitchens and cooked.

¹ Amos 5:21-24; The New English Bible 1970

I have most often used Christian illustrations for this critique of religion, but it is not just Christian steeple places in the United States that are crazy making. Of course there are Muslim movements and Jewish movements that are also crazy making, as our news reports indicate. Not all Muslims, not all Jews are paranoid fools prone to ineffective and stupid violence, but many are. Such paranoid defensiveness in religious practice is self defeating and criminal. Many of the Hindus and Muslims of Sub-Asia have slaughtered each other in incredible fits of defensive stupidity and astonishing rage. And what are we to say about the Protestants and Catholics of Northern Ireland and other places? In Ireland the scars are still felt from the religious sentiments that were fanned out of shape for so many years. Religion can be a mean and dangerous thing. Even when overt violence is not an obvious manifestation, people are too often being twisted out of shape by doctrines and moralities and communal bonds that discourage rather than assist people in opening to profound humanness.

How can we approve of any citizen of the United States who see the antics of a Sarah Palin, a Michele Backmann, or a Rick Santorum without throwing up their hands in dismay over the prospect of allowing such fanaticism to assume the Presidency of the United States? What is going on here? And what is its cure?

The basic story goes something like this: The cultures of the world have changed and are changing in ways that challenge deeply the formulations of religion that millions of people have taken on as their systems of security. Rather than change the religious practices in order to live fully in this era of history, many people have revolted against the onward march of time. They have insisted on turning back the clock. In addition to not opening to real life themselves and not reforming their own religious practices, they have engaged in the futile attempt to force their obsolete religious sensibilities upon everyone, often incorporating political means of doing so, or allowing themselves to be used by scheming politicians who prey upon their bigotry to get votes for still other tragedies.

So, as you now finish the reading of this book, turn again to chapters 14, 15, and 16 and take in once more the qualities of that profound humanness we want our religious formations to help us access. Then read again Chapter 19 and see if you can discern the religious practices that you and others you know most need to practice in order to get on with our journey into the full enigma of Wonder that is our profound life.