

Foreword:

Today I shall do what I criticized in my preaching students – I am going to cram too many topics in too much detail into too little time. This happens because I discovered that my planned two part series needs to be presented in one – today's. So my apologies.

As a result we will have a three part talk that will take approximately 25 minutes.

First:

Based on an understanding of how religions are formed, and the needs they meet, I shall indicate how radical and extreme religions form. We'll meet revolutions and Donald Trump along the way.

Second:

Noting that religion is both universal and rejected by many I shall point out the source of that dilemma and point the way forward for religions based on reverting to their founder's vision.

Third:

Given that religion is a necessary aspect of human life I will suggest changes that religions can make to be better received and of better service to coming generations.

After that we can chat over coffee time and lunch.

If you already feel like falling asleep, feel free, there will be extended copies of the talk on line and in print for – both regular and large print. Just let Helen Moore or myself know and we will get a copy to you.

So, ready! Hold on. Let's begin.

Talk on 'Religion' at the Universal Unitarian Church, Olinda, Ont. 16 July 2017 Rev. D.A. Parry

Introduction (*Italicized sections may or may not be included in the oral presentation.*)

PART 1 – the grounding and extremes of religions.

The news media is full of terrorist actions – and always, so it seems, the terrorist is reported to be religiously motivated. Today they are often Muslim extremists. This week we recall the 22nd anniversary of Bosnian Christians killing 8,000 Muslim men, and before that Protestants and Catholics were conducting a civil war in Northern Ireland. So include Buddhist monks at war in Burma and Ceylon, Hindu extremists now persecuting Muslims and Christians in India. No wonder people throw up their hands and say – “All of this, along with exploiting TV evangelists and sexually frustrated priests: I want nothing to do with your religions.”

Given these facts, the dilemmas facing we who favour religious faith and life are:

First: How do we stop growing extremist radicals operating under the guise of religion?

And second: How do we grow a religion which can be rationally received and well serve people in the coming century?

I will suggest ways to meet these dilemmas, and I'll flesh out those options should another opportunity arise.

The dilemma facing the opponents of religion is simpler: Is there a replacement for religion? I will show that there is not. You cannot combat bad religion with no religion, only healthy religion will do that job.

So then: What can we do to combat extremists and charlatans, and grow a reasonable and functioning religion?

First of all, we can understand the persistent and valid needs that religion serves, and then seek to grow thoughtful and healthy religious communities meeting the needs of a fractured, hurting world. So let us move toward understanding the phenomenon of religion which, properly understood, has been with us, everywhere, as long as human history has been recorded.

So, why do religions exist at all?

Everyone has to have a worldview. Worldviews are built on people's observations – even from before birth. From our experiences we work out three basics about how the world works:

what is reliably there for me in my world?

what is contingent in my world? (That is, what consequences depend on my actions.)
and, what is beyond my control in my world? (From bowel movements, to weather patterns,
to the availability of food and shelter, to the death of loved ones, and the fertility
or barrenness of partners.)

So: what is not reliable? what is inconsistently contingent? and what is vital to us and ours but beyond our control? We want to know because all of these things can increase our uncertainty. In critical matters we people seek to avoid uncertainty in our world. Uncertainty generates anxiety and tension within us as a result of our evolutionary need to stay safe so as to reproduce.

Simply understanding that feature of uncertainty, anxiety and tension, understanding that, helps us to recognize some of the emotional grounds of extremists – and the predominance of youth as the age of recruitment.

Understanding the need for certainty and security also helps us to understand why violent revolutions take place when the poor have nothing much left to lose, and are wanting someone else to blame. They, then, are most ready to be used to empower the visions of some self-promoting saviour, and they are hypnotized by the proffered rewards of the saviour's success, for those rewards fulfill their traditional values, ideals and aspirations.

(It was child's play really, wasn't it Mr. Trump.)

Now, the reaction of extremists to their parents' tradition can be either,
rejection by reversal of the tradition in which they were raised, or
rejection by amplification of the tradition in which they were raised.

Those of us who were around in the late sixties and early seventies will have seen in the flower children, at Woodstock etc. their rejection by reversal of their parents' tradition: they engaged in drugs, unemployment, sexual liberty.

Rejection by amplification is illustrated in what I am assured is a true story.

A young man, an American, had been raised by his parents in a strict, controlling, religious tradition. As youths will, once he was of age he rebelled, wanting to live his own life, and to decide his own future. So, he left home, and after awhile, feeling his own way, he joined the Marines!

What happened? He gave himself to, became radicalized by a black-and-white, us-versus-them organization which promised to fulfill in him the ideals inculcated by his own family. Extreme radicalization can be that simple. Main-line society uses the technique all the time.

Essentially, the ideals have to be there without an immediate expectation of fulfillment, then an extreme organization can exploit them with an aspirational vision (be a hero, be a martyr) which gives immediate value and meaning to the life and death of the recruit – fulfilling their traditional ideals.

Lower levels of uncertainty stimulate less extreme responses. In our stressful world just meeting the unknown, meeting women dressed in a full-length niqab can generate a black-and-white, us-versus-them reaction.

I was visiting my Dr. at Leamington hospital recently. I was on the second floor waiting for the elevator. Then behind me came a family – woman, man, two children. Their clothing suggested that they were financially o.k. but with not much to spare. We had no chance to talk as the elevator soon arrived, the door opened, and I stood back. I was startled but not upset and I knew what to do – I just stepped back respectfully and let the two women leave the elevator: dressed in full-length black niqab – nothing showing but their eyes - followed by a western dressed young girl, and a man, who smiled and nodded and said “Thank you.” I nodded in response.

Those of us descending entered the elevator and the man said, “I don't like that.” I said, “I'm an immigrant, I came here fifty years ago.”

He replied, “Yea, but ...” I said, “As long as they pull their weight I don't mind what they wear.” He said, “But I don't know who we're with.” I said, “I don't need to know: I don't know you, and you don't know me. We're o.k. aren't we?” The young father just stood there taking it all in and slowly said, “But they're not the same ...”. Maybe it was the first time he had seen women in a full niqab. What associations were coming to his mind? What did he really need to see to feel safe? “They're not the same ...” The start of us-versus-them. Did he imagine his family at risk – did he fear a suicide vest under that black cloth? Was his job at risk? What we do know is that he felt at risk, here was an unknown, and there he was

uncertain.

Keep in mind then, that, as uncertainty is felt to be increasing around us, the desire for a feeling of certainty increases within us, and we seek out 'places', 'spaces' of certainty. In the extreme we might create such a space totally within us – or, in the extreme we might look to radical religion: a black-and-white, us-versus-them, religion. It doesn't have to be violent today, it just has to be extreme.

But, a healthy community's religion both recognizes such feelings of anxiety, and seeks to embrace such feelings, explain such feelings, guide behaviour among such feelings - so that a community can function well.

PART 2 – Religions distortion of the originating visions.

So a religion helps us deal with the uncertainties, the anxieties of the unknown and uncontrollable in our world. But keep in mind that a religion fulfills many other functions for people and their communities.

Another side of religion is the community's need to express its sense of awe and gratitude at the overwhelming size and sustaining role of nature, and gratitude for the insight and support of its community.

A third role of religion is the description, governance and affirmation of community values: including what fulfills the ultimate purpose of a human life and that includes the assessment of a 'good' life and a 'good' community. It draws a picture of the life to which we aspire.

A fourth function of religion is the governance of behaviour within and between communities – that becomes law in larger societies.

But note a weakness: because religion fulfills such critical roles, for individuals and communities, that power over people is attractive - as power -

attractive to those already powerful to justify their benefits,
and to those driven to revolution to critique society's failings,
and to those simply motivated by self-aggrandizement.

Religion is so necessary to people that it is too powerful to be dismissed.

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We've briefly looked at the formation of extreme religion in the individual and its dependence on the aspirational quality of religion – becoming a hero or martyr. Let's look at how this aspirational quality is miss-used. The example taken is from communism, but note the process, Marx, to Lenin, to Stalin. Note how the latter disciples distort the earlier vision.

It is said that Karl Marx describes religion as 'the opiate of the masses', *and so it is - when religion is disrupted or incomplete, but not when it is functioning well, then religion is the driver of progress toward a visionary worldview.* But that quote from Marx, the visionary, is incomplete, here it is in a more complete version,

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless

world, and the soul of soulless conditions. (*In that way, it*) is the opium of the people. ¹

(*Italics section added.*)

And note that, in that time and place, opium was not the dread illegal drug of today's perception but was a stress reliever, an anxiety relieving pastime.

Marx's moderate and functional view of religion amplified to an abusive form was taken up by Lenin, who then initiated a secular religion which achieved the oppressive results he saw as being possible through abusive religion. (*We get a lot of that today too, don't we?*)

That manipulative abuse of religion was then fulfilled in the extreme by Stalin. But note, that is not the absence of religion, rather Lenin and Stalin simply applied the power of religion in another form. The 'gods', values, and aspirational vision changed, but intense education, faith, participation, allegiance, they were still prime features of communism – the new religion.

Let us now take what we have learned from our focus on extremists and look at the hurdles standing in the way of growing a religion for the years to come.

¹ The quotation originates from the introduction of Marx's work [*A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*](#), which he started in 1843 but which was not published until after his death. The introduction to this work was published separately in 1844, in Marx's own journal [*Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*](#), a collaboration with [Arnold Ruge](#). This comment from Wikipedia “Opium smoking has become less common and less accepted since Marx wrote this now-famous line. Some writers speculate on what the modern equivalent would be, such as [sports fandom](#), [celebrities](#), the distractions of television, internet, and other entertainment, etc.” https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opium_of_the_people. It is Lenin who expresses the full denigration of abusive religion in *Novaya Zhizn*, #28, Dec. 03, 1905 (see Marxists Internet Archive) not Marx.

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Back to basics for a while. As a general statement, a religion, a worldview and faith taught within a community, came about as a way to minimize anxiety, anxiety resulting from random but powerful events, and that anxiety was quietened somewhat by at least positing that even random events were rational, intentional, and purposeful – a very scientific hypothesis for a very ancient people.

That quietening of anxiety was achieved in early religion by projecting a human quality onto the unknown and we called them 'gods' - that which was in control of something, that which caused something to happen – for good or ill.

You can verify this by comparing all the pantheons of gods in the religions across the world, and through time. The worship of the gods was initially designed to placate or manipulate the unknown powers, X, gods, for protection or for favours.

But, as word substitutes, the gods were, essentially, no different from X, the unknown factors posited by modern science while science tries to understand and thus, possibly, control and manipulate X – for protection or production. The more things change

'X's are real things in science, to be replaced with better defined names as our understanding increases.

'God's are equally real as forces causing changes in psycho-social arrangements, and once we understand their definition we can recognize them as such even as their forces are better understood, and their names and categories change. Today we might call ancient gods – weather patterns, drought, infertility, cancer, etc, etc.

But, now, we don't generally need the gods for protection or production – we have science and technology. So now we look at the gods, as time and cash consumers, now we look at them with skeptical eyes. - and most often what we see is hypocrisy. That's one of our obstacles to healthy religion serving the future.

Because of the aspirational quality of healthy religions they are peculiarly open to charges of hypocrisy, that is, we don't always live up to the standards we profess. We don't make real the paradise we claim to be life's goal.

And, the charge of hypocrisy is amplified by those who abuse religion, resulting in a stream of

people who turn to atheism.

The hypocrisy charge is legitimate as it stands, but in religions' defense G.K. Chesterton replied to it stating that “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found to be very difficult and not tried.”²

I previously noted many of the extremist movements embedded in major religions, but note this, please, each extreme of violence is opposed by the enlightened one whose vision founded the faith.

How come this muddling of messages? What we discover is that the enthusiasm of the generations following the enlightened founder overlay the original vision with one of competition and power, of us-versus-them, leading to violence. But that isn't what the originating visionaries, Muhammad, Jesus, Buddha, etc. looked for, and taught, and put into practice.

Muhammad, visionary of the Muslim faith respected the other religions he met: Christianity and Judaism. Listen to the covenant Muhammad made with the Monastery of St. Catharines in 628 C.E..

This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.

No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. ...”

That is not the vision of today's extreme Islam. Muhammad offers mutual respect and peaceful co-existence.

Similarly, Jesus, despite the horrific extremes of his followers through the centuries, Jesus opposed violence. His death was an exemplar of how to defeat violence with non-violence.

Jesus said,

² G.K. Chesterton, What's wrong with the world

Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who treat you spitefully. ... you must love your enemies and do good; and lend without expecting any return; and you will have a rich reward: you will be sons of the Most High, because he himself is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.

(from Luke 6:27-36)

And consider Guatama Buddha: no more peaceful visionary has ever lived.

All tremble at violence; all fear death.

Putting oneself in the place of another,

one should not kill (*anything*) nor cause another to kill. (*italics added*)

(The Dhammapada, verse 129.)

As I am, so are these.

As are these, so am I.'

Drawing the parallel to yourself,

neither kill nor get others to kill.

(From *Nalaka Sutta*, which is found in the *Sutta Nipata*)

Note then, the fundamental source of distortion; the distortion of healthy religion is caused by other evolutionary traits particularly in early disciples: my seed versus your seed, my tribe against yours, my nation, my culture, my faith, my gods against yours. It's evolutionary competition: plain and simple. It distorts every good endeavour – in politics, business, family life, and faith. Human traits distort the very faith foundation on which we stand. We are our own worst enemies.

No wonder many throw up their hands and turn to atheism, hoping to escape it all. Of course, since we are talking about evolutionary history, we can't escape.

Thus atheism accompanies, exists within the history of major religions – but note this, that atheists, while in reaction to the dominant religion, frequently atheists create another religion. We can recognize their 'god's – by whatever name - their aspirational vision, the grounding for their values, what they worship, what they hold to be of most fundamental value – whether individual, or Church, or state ??? Why, even anarchists organize themselves.

Again, this past week we saw a celebration of secular atheism – the July 14th 1789 Bastille Day, centred in Paris. Look what happened to religion during the French Revolution: many Churches were taken over, stripped of their statues and altars – and then, like Notre Dame in Strasbourg, they became temples again, only this time, temples to reason. It was in that period that Voltaire noted that “If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent Him”.³ Why? For the cultural reason of providing a basis for laws, expressive of values and the purpose of person and state.

We have seen the religious atheism surrounding the French Revolution against institutional Christianity. The trend continues in other great religions.

Buddhism, of course, is intentionally atheistic, acknowledging no creator God, yet clearly it is a religion with a set of values, an aspirational goal, and a specific purpose for people and community.

So we see that religion is necessary, but particular gods may not be.

But atheists do still have to live in communities, thus they need values to live by. Even atheists want to feel like their lives were worthwhile – thus they need standard visions and goals to strive for. Even atheists need community affirmation along life's journey, and community sanctions when people diverge from the authorized path. Even atheists have their gods – their hierarchy of what is most important to them, governing their actions and attitudes at any particular time. So, do you see? Humans have psycho-social needs for all of these things. Why, even anarchists organize themselves.

PART 3 – Changes in religions to be received better and serve better.

But what then can religions do to serve the future?

Religions can, I propose, be willing to abandon most 'god' terms – it would do us well to so understand our 'god' terms that we might translate them into today's functional terms.

Religions can, I propose, be willing to recognize that all words, yes, all words are just signs – they point to something; something we experience or something we think, but words

³ As noted by Andrzej Nowicki, wyzwolić lud z tego uciemnienia, zostaliby zdławieni przez sam lud. Andrzej Nowicki, 1957 see in Geoffrey Blainey; A Short History of Christianity; Viking; 2011;

only point, they only point to something else. Religion is a message painted in words, it works through metaphors and stories, some parables, some myths.

Religions can, I propose, recognize the different value, the priority of the visionary founder, Buddha, Muhammad, Jesus, etc. and the re-working of their visions by those who took over from them.

In very early Christianity there was a struggle between Paul and James as to what should be the continuing vision of Jesus and how to interpretation the life and death of Jesus. James's version is barely visible now. That of Paul dominates and frames Jesus in terms of the sacrificial theology of the Temple. Paul has scrubbed Jesus of his simplicity. Now Jesus has to have been born of a virgin in order to be the needed perfect sacrifice – and the immaculate conception of Mary too perhaps. With Paul the focus is on sin and forgiveness paid for by the death of Jesus – with James it was how you lived together, with Jesus as exemplar.

Religions, I propose, should not abandon the experience of what we might call a mystical reality – though we acknowledge that we do not know in physical terms what that is, but the experience is real.

There is no reason why that human experience should be dismissed while all the rest of human life depends on working with human experience.

Religions should sponsor non-reductionistic scientific investigation of life-after-death, out-of-body, and near death experiences.

That is, investigation that does not assume that because you can show how something happens that there is nothing more to be said as to why it happens, dismissing the reality of what happens in the life of the person experiencing it. Or, simpler, to be able to explain the taste of a strawberry doesn't invalidate the experience of eating one.

Religions should not abandon the value of the community rehearsal of celebration, affirmation, and comfort through the vagaries of life. Such 'worship' of the enduring is needed to re-align the mind to that on which we confidently depend, even if that is only thought of as 'nature'.

I hope this has given you something worthwhile thinking on. May you receive and be open to new insight as you ponder the message for today. Thank you.