

Hard Jolts  
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Annual Meeting Sunday

Our resident historian, Al Southwick, sent me a news clipping recently about a meeting sponsored by our church in January 1910 – nearly 100 years ago. The Rev. Austin Garver was the minister of the church, and he had invited 3 other clergymen to come and discuss what they called “the New Theology” with a group of interested laypeople.

The headline read “Urges a New Theology, Doing way with Old Dogmas.” And the subheadline was “No Use for Hell, Virgin Birth, the Fall of Man or Resurrection in the Body.”

The writer of the article was quite impressed by how shocking the presentation of the new theology was:

“There were some hard jolts for those who adhere strongly to strict biblical ideas before the rapid and invading force of scientific religion.”

“Hard Jolts”

The article drove home a point that has been made to me more than once, and of which we all need to be reminded, especially on a day like today, which is our Annual Meeting Sunday.

This is an old church, gathered in 1785, approaching its 225<sup>th</sup> birthday in a few years. The basic design of the building was created in 1854, and it was a traditional style, even then. The room we sit in was designed then, and all around us are traditional architectural motifs. It is easy to see all the signs of tradition here. And it is important that we respect the traditions of this church. But we should remember that those people, the ones whose names are listed in the Worcester Telegram as having come to hear 4 ministers preach on the New Theology, they did not come to First Unitarian because it was a traditional church. They came because they wanted to hear some “hard jolts” to the conventional wisdom of their day. They were the theological radicals of 1910, and the best way that we can honor their tradition is to keep this church a center for new thinking about religion, the spirit, and church and worship.

One of the ministers who spoke that night in 1910 told this story:

*“A farmer and his wife went to the circus and visited the menagerie, seeing in speechless wonder the various animals, all so strange to them. After they gone about carefully, they came to the giraffe. There before the animal they stood, held in a spell of wonder, broken only when the farmer remarked: “It’s no use, Maria, they hain’t no such thing.”*

The minister then drew this conclusion. *“There are people today that do not see that which is constantly before them in immovable fact.”*

In 1910, the facts of evolution, the facts of science, the learnings of historical research into the origins of the Bible and how it was written: these were all immovable facts that some people were, like that farmer, could not see, would not see, even though they were right before their eyes. There are still some people with that particular blindness around today.?

But my question this morning is this:

***What are the immovable facts about the state of religion that are before our eyes today, that most people will not see, that we ourselves have trouble seeing,?.***

I love that story that the minister told about a giraffe, because there is a second metaphorical meaning to the giraffe. Not only does its neck make it seem like an impossible animal, but that neck is good for sticking out, and it makes it possible for the giraffe to get up above the crowd and see a little further.

If I were to try to be a giraffe today, and stick my neck out, I would try to look ahead and say the following.

One, Organized religion, as the Western world had known it for thousands of years, is dying a painful and convulsive death.

And Two, The religious impulse is being reborn, resurrected, in entirely new circumstances and arrangements.

Many people do not have the impression that organized Western religions are dying. We see, instead, the power of fundamentalism in both Christianity and Islam, and while fundamentalism Judaism seems remote to us, if we lived in Israel, it would not. In fact, the world today is being shaped by conflicts between fundamentalist religions. We have the sneaky feeling that, even at the highest levels of our government, in the Oval Office, itself, that people there see the conflict in the Middle East as a religious war, between Christians and Muslims, a conflict that as it gets worse only brings the day of Christ’s return closer. And on the other side, we are all being very persistently educated in the power of Islamic fundamentalism, as a religious point of view, and the political lessons Muslims draw from it.

But we must raise our sights a little higher and remember that all of these forms of fundamentalisms are, in fact, in reaction to, and in opposition to, a much broader movement toward secularism, modernity and what in 1910 was called the New Theology.

We are able to see that Christian fundamentalism is a defense against a modernizing and secularizing culture. And we see that a particular strain of Jewish fundamentalism has developed in Israel, long a secularized society. And while I have less knowledge about the world of Islam, I cannot help but think that the Western secularism seems so threatening to the Islamic fundamentalists because there are portions of their population which are attracted to it.

So, If we are to raise our vision a little higher, like the giraffe, stretching our neck to see a little further, we might want to say that the religious world is a conflict between secularism and religion, especially fundamentalist religions.

This is the conventional wisdom of the day. ,

I do not think that it is the whole story. I think that we are missing something right before our eyes. And so, I want to stick my neck way out now, like a giraffe, and say this: Secularism is not the enemy of Christianity; it is the natural outgrowth and fullest realization of Christianity. I agree with a few theologians and thinkers who are now saying that Western religion is evolving into secularism. Secular society is the culmination of some of the most crucial themes of the Western religions.

The western religions have been moving have a direction in their movement. It actually has many directions, because like everything in history, it goes this way and then that way and circles back on itself, but it does have direction.

But you can sum up the direction of western religion with these movements.

God goes from “out there”, to “in here”. Think about it – at the beginning of the story, God is out there, the creator of all the Earth, and then he comes down to Earth as Jesus, and he is killed and resurrected, and enters the body of believers as the Holy Spirit. From out there to in here.

God starts out talking to the patriarchs, and then to Kings, and then to disreputable prophets, and then comes as a carpenter, who is executed as a criminal and one of the last times people see the risen Jesus, they think him an ordinary man, a fellow traveler, walking with them to Emmaus.

Worship goes from rituals in the Temple, to worshipping in truth and spirit.

Our sacred duties go from sacrifices at the altar to ethical living and justice-making.

God’s favor goes from those He chooses, to all of humanity, especially those who are suffering.

I ask you to look again at the responsive reading we read this morning – from Isaiah. This passage is, time wise, from about the middle of the Old Testament, from the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century before the common era. The oldest parts of the Old Testament were written 4 or 5 centuries earlier, the newest parts were about the same time frame after it. And Isaiah is talking about how God does not interested in the sacrifices made at the Temple, but instead wants people to behave more ethically. What Isaiah reflects is a movement of religion, from outward ritual toward the inward, toward the personal and toward the ethical.

Look at the reading this morning from John 4. Jesus, speaking to a Samaritan woman, a people who worshipped the same God but differed from the ancient Jews about the role of the Temple and Jerusalem, takes it all the way. “The hour is coming and is now here when the true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. God is spirit and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.” One can read this passage as calling for the end of organized religion and the direct individual encounter with God, in spirit and in truth, inward, personal and ethical.

I believe that when this movement toward the personal, toward inward, toward religion as lived reality and not a belief structure, toward ordinary people and away from power is fulfilled, what emerges is a secular society. Western Religion, over the course of its history, places more and more emphasis on each individual holding the religious truth in their innermost hearts. And if the test of religion is whether a person sincerely holds those values in his or her heart, then does it not follow that each person must have the freedom of conscience. And does it not follow that the state first, and then the church must ask no more than voluntary compliance with religious rules? And does that not lead ultimately to a secular society? The whole thrust of Western religion, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic, is that each of us must freely choose God, in our own hearts, and if we are to freely choose, then we must be free to choose, which must also mean that we must be free to not choose.

Christendom is replaced by a secular society. And Religion, organized religion that is powerful social institution, is replaced by personal spirituality. So everywhere you go, people say, “I am not religious, but I am spiritual.”

What do we mean by a secular society? I think that it more than a society which is legally secular – one that practices separation of church and state. There is an ideological component to secularism as well. The cultural hegemony of religion as a set of beliefs has been broken. People understand their lives according to their own standards and schemes; there is not an overarching religious understanding which defines normalcy and reality for everyone. The focus of people’s lives are in the here and now, the practical details of their own happiness and success – their ethical and moral standards are derived from their own reflection and common sense.

Where a person fits into the great cosmos, the multitude of other people, the planet and all our fellow travelers on it, how one relates to the possibilities of one's own mistakes, errors and sins – in a secular society, these questions are inward questions, they are personal questions and they are ethical questions. These are understood by ordinary persons to be spiritual questions. The accumulated wisdom of the world's religions are a resource for the exploration, but religion itself is not authoritative. The people do not recognize external authorities, because the final authority for each person's spiritual quest is internal, inward, and personal.

I do believe that the great prophets and religious teachers of all the ages have wanted this for us, the ordinary people of the Earth. That our hearts be open to joy, to wonder, to gratitude. That we should be careful about how we live with other people, neither bringing them harm, nor turning away from their suffering. That we are free of all coercion in matters of the spirit, but take up our tasks with glad hands and a joyous heart. That we let the long conversation between loving the world and loving the Lord go on in our hearts.

These are the spiritual tasks of a free people in a secular society. Oh, the fundamentalists of all types are aghast and cannot imagine that men and women will have holy hearts unless they are pressured by conformity. They say that they are fighting for God, but they are actually fighting for power over people. They may drag the whole world down with them. Who knows?

But what we are about is summed up by Theodore Parker ““Be ours a religion which, like sunshine goes everywhere; its temple, all space; its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living.”

Amen