

RELIGION: WHO NEEDS IT?

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July 17, 2011

Exodus 3:1-6; Acts 17:16-31

The newsletter of a neighboring church arrived in the mail one summer. On the front page, before the news there was this exhortation, entitled, "*Psalm of Summer*":

"Forget not thy church in the days of summer, when the road doth beckon and miles flit by, and new vistas are pleasant before thee; when the sun and the light, the moon and the stars shine with brilliance, and the clouds pass over thy picnic withholding their rain.

Let thy heart cheer thee in these days, and remember that thy God doth provide all that maketh thee glad. Remember also thy covenant with thy church not only to be faithful in worship, but with joy and regularity to make thy contributions to it's good work--God's work--in all the seasons, yea, even in summer. Selah."

Summer does pose a bit of a problem for the church, does it not? Church treasurers know this, but so do the rest of us! In the church of my youth, I can remember the choir director's frequent exhortation, as he tried to muster a choir fit for worship: "*In the summer,*" he reminded us, "*God does not go on vacation.*" Ah, but in the summer many of the rest of us do.

Summer means, at any rate, a slackening of the pace for most of us. The longer daylight hours seem to give us more time for doing whatever we have to do. The radiant warmth of the sun invites us to leisure, rest and fun. In the summer it is not hard to grasp why many of the ancients-like some of our contemporaries-were worshippers of the sun.

Such thoughts as these come to me while I am on vacation. The lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer have often worked their seductive magic on me. I find myself wishing the vacation could last indefinitely. One summer several years ago we vacationed by taking a journey around Lake Huron for almost a week. For most of that time we were in another country. In many ways it was like being in another world. No newspapers; no TV; no e-mail; no major responsibilities. Who needs work? Who needs obligations? Who needs meetings and projects and a yard to mow?

With a little more money and a Visa card with a high enough limit we could keep on flitting from place to place, or camping out in the womb of nature, all summer long. Who could ask for anything more!

The implicit question that has often insinuated itself into my summer reveries goes something like this: Why go back? What lack is there in this--this eating of food we have not cooked, on dishes we will not have to wash; this seeing of sights whose beauty no effort of ours can rival; this undemanding time for being together, or for simply being; this season to enjoy? In particular, I

have found myself wondering, why do people need religion? Why bother with the church? It is not hard for me to understand why our churches struggle with the "Summer slump"? The rest of the world seems to be at its most hospitable and inviting. Can religion offer anything that is not readily surpassed by the lake and the beach and the sun?

There is no doubt that religion has its uses, and very important ones at that. For one thing, our lives are hardly summery all the time. Even our vacations have to be paid for, if not now then later. The air is not always warm; the sun does not always shine. Karl Marx was not being altogether cynical when he wrote that, "*Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world..it is the opium of the people.*" (Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction). Although Marx judged religion to be an illusion, he saw it to be a kind of answer to real distress. Opium may dull the senses, but it also eases the pain.

There is an inclination to discount religion merely because it answers our human need, as if true religion ought to be something we have no need of at all. So some cynic has said, "*There is not the least use preaching to anyone unless you chance to catch them ill.*" (Sydney Smith, in Auden and Kronenberger, Aphorisms,87). In a more serious vein, Martin Marty writes of religion that is adequate for the wintry seasons of our lives. Published shortly after the death of his first wife, his book Cry Of Absence, speaks of our human need for a religious faith that runs much deeper than the rosy, optimistic, positive thinking variety that is popular in our time. There are periods and times when winter symbolizes much better than summer the character of our passing days.

Religion offers strength and consolation to those who are suffering, grieving, and oppressed. We need it when the clouds do not withhold their rain from our picnics. Religion also promises a disruption of the routine. One of the delights of summer is its opportunity to "get away", to alter the pace, to do something new. We need this periodic disruption of the ordinary, and our religion ought also to provide it. If there is a spiritual hunger in our churches today, perhaps it is because our diet has been too bland, our efforts too cautious, our worship too predictable. A solicitation from the journal, Theology Today, used to arrive with a question printed boldly across the front of the outside envelope: "*Can a responsible journal of religion still be surprising?*" And answer was also printed boldly below: "*It had better be...for God's action in history surprises us without end.*"

This is a problem for today's religion: how to be responsible and surprising: serious and lively; critical and passionate; realistic and hopeful; honest and committed. There needs to be some excitement in religion, some stirring of heart and mind, some breaking of habitual patterns of thought and feeling, some elevation of life above the everyday. Harold Bosley once reported, "*When someone tells me that he has never had a moment of probing religious doubt I find myself wondering whether he had ever known a moment of vital religious conviction.*" (Enc. of Religious Quotations, 544) A vital religious faith is not static and resolved. It is less an attainment than a journey, an exploration, an adventure. It is a path of discovery. As William Ernest Hocking vividly put it, "*No religion is a true religion that does not make [people] tingle to their finger tips with a sense of infinite hazard.*" (ERQ, 551) How else should we feel when we are entrusting our very lives and fortunes to Another, upon whose Goodness and Power we must ultimately rely?

There is, perhaps paradoxically, another side to this. Any religion that is worth its salt enlivens life, infuses it with the sense of adventure. But at the same time, a vital religion works to bring an integrity and coherence to our experiences of life. The promise of religion is not cheap thrills, but a profoundly deepening apprehension of the mystery and meaning of our existence. Religion is not a "rule of safety" (A. N. Whitehead), but it does provide a grounding, a centering, a texture of meaning to our lives. In a way, religion offers something to hold on to amid the passing flux of circumstance. Religion cannot answer all of life's questions or resolve all of life's mysteries, but it finds meaning and purpose in the quest.

Even on vacation, with no imposed deadlines or schedules to meet, we do not function very well without some aim, some goal, some destiny. On more than one occasion when we have been on vacation my wife and I have chosen to take some back road that hints at unusual adventure. Sometimes we find ourselves temporarily disoriented, not sure where we are going, wondering when and where we might end up, despite a detailed map and a brightly shining sun. Usually there is no cause for great anxiety, but the simple fact of not knowing quite where we are or which way to go can turn what had been an absorbing foray through the countryside into a disconcerting and unwelcome aggravation. Since we were heading someplace we had never been before, I suppose we really do not need to know that much about where we are going, but we do depend on some idea of how to get there. On the one hand, religion provides us with the vision, the invitation, the aspiration to adventure, while on the other hand confirming and sustaining us along the way. Religion points out the meaning and the purpose that inhere in the steps we take.

Religion no doubt has other uses, and functions in other ways as well. That religion is an answer to some very real human needs should be no cause for embarrassment. Of course we should get some good out of our religion. We should be embarrassed if we do not get any good out of it.

There remains, however, a kind of spiritual conceit that does not take any of this very seriously. William Willimon, who is now Chaplain to Duke University, relates the following encounter:

"Well, so you're a minister," he said as he sipped his lime punch. "That's nice."

"Yes," I responded. Having the uncomfortable feeling that I was about to be trapped in a conversation which I wouldn't enjoy, I frantically looked about the room for someone to rescue me.

"I never cared much for the church," he continued. "Oh, I went as a child. I suppose everyone goes in their childhood. But then I went away to college, got into business for myself, and I just never felt the need of it again. Not that I'm against religion or anything. I consider myself to be quite religious in my own way. I just don't need it."

It was the kind of monologue which tempts a minister to try to conceal his or her profession when at a party. My party conversationalist continued, *"I suppose that I'm about as good as the next person. I try to live right, support needy causes around town, and keep my little garden in order. I'm happy. And, after all, isn't that what religion is all about?"* He emptied the last drop from his punch cup.

"Some people think that's all it's about," I rather half-heartedly replied.

"Well, anyway, I think it's just great you're a minister and all. I'm sure you do good for some people. Lord knows the world needs people like you to help it along." (The Gospel for the Person Who has Everything, 51)

The attitude here is not all that uncommon: Religion is for children and others who cannot manage on their own. It is all right if others need it. It even makes a good topic of conversation; but it's not for me. I just don't need it.

This is one way to trivialize religion. The apostle Paul reportedly encountered another way when he visited the city of Athens. Observing the objects of their worship, he finds an altar with the inscription, "*To an unknown god.*" We can hardly miss the great irony of his words to the men of Athens: "*I perceive that in every way you are very religious.*" So religious, indeed, that they spend their time "*in nothing except telling or hearing something new,*" (Acts 17:21). So religious, they have become connoisseurs.

Yet even Athens, where all religious bets were hedged, tells us something about the pervasiveness of religion. What Paul says to the Athenians is ironically true. He is hardly disparaging them when he calls them religious. As Harry Emerson Fosdick observed in one of his sermons, Paul "*was confronting them with an austere fact: religion inescapable: religion immensely powerful; religion, the thing (people) do practically believe in and give themselves to, inevitable; and therefore all (people) faced with this unavoidable choice--what kind of religion will you have?*" (On Being Fit to Live With, 79)

Surely all people seek some context of meaning. All people need some way to deal with their own mortality. All have answers, however tentative, to life's difficulties. All must have some practiced ways of breaking through the routines of everyday. For some people in the summer this may amount to little more than trying to acquire the most beautiful tan. Our religion can be as trivial as it can be profound. The question is really not, "*Who needs religion?*" But, "*What sort of religion do we need?*"

We need a religion that can see us through the wintry seasons of our lives, but we also need a religion that is equal to our glorious summer days. We need a religion for tough times and difficult circumstances, but we also need a religion for when life seems at its best. I suspect that those people who feel they have no need of religion have either found some exceptionally exciting alternative to the conventional forms of religion or, more likely, their own sensitivities have become so deadened and dull that they are drifting through life half-asleep. We who are self-consciously religious may likewise find ourselves enticed by the excitements of ephemeral projects and events, or lulled into complacency by the false promise of an earthly comfort and peace. Thinking that we are religious is no guarantee that our religion is any better than the rest.

At least two things are required of a religion that is equal to our summery days. One is the possibility of surprise. Without some sense of risk and adventure, without an awareness that there is much more going on here than ordinarily meets the eye, there is no reason religion should excite

a summery soul. What if this world of ours is really filled with the presence of God? What if, in glimpses of the great mystery of our existence revealed within and through the familiar features of our world, the wonder and joy of our lives is sometimes made known? Moses was out tending sheep in the wilderness of Sinai, a very ordinary task, when there appeared to him a vision of God. It was an ordinary bush, but for that moment it appeared on fire with the presence of the divine. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg comments on this text, "*The reality of God surrounds us; the dynamic of that deep mystery of our life and our world is at hand with every breeze and breath. We need some messenger, some angel of god to remind us...*" (James W. Cox, ed., The Twentieth Century Pulpit, 162). Or, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning poetically expressed it: "*Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*" (Aurora Leigh, Bk. VII. Line 820)

Moses saw, and took off his shoes, for he heard God saying, "*the place on which you are standing is holy ground.*" This is an encounter with the mystery of the holy. In this encounter there is also the other ingredient needed by religion for our summer days. That other ingredient is a challenge, an opportunity, a demand. To Moses it was a call to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Interestingly enough, Moses did not even think he wanted to go. He had all kinds of excuses. He had no standing among the people. He did not know the name of God. How would the people know it was their God who had sent him? He was not even an eloquent speaker. But finally, Moses was unable to resist the call of the divine. He gave himself to the challenge and the opportunity and the demand of God. He was standing on holy ground.

We have been considering what we get out of religion, but now we can see that the real crux of the matter is what religion gets out of us! As Paul Scherer once preached to his congregation, "*Religion was intended to make something out of you! Let the rest take care of itself!*" (Cox, op.cit., 62) In our confidence and strength and vigor of life, as in our days of struggle and pain and grief, there is nothing we need more than to be able to meet the challenge and opportunity of life, to give ourselves to the highest, to be ourselves at our best.

In all our summer comings and goings, and in all the seasons of our life, let us be aware that the reality of God surrounds us. And let us be open to the possibility that we are standing on holy ground. In the summer God does not take a vacation. Who knows where we may be found! Amen.

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