

## The Two Edged Sword

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In the town where I grew up there were two types of families, the divorced ones and the religious ones.

The Lawrences were divorced. They lived in a whirlwind of "anything goes," and the only things I remember the children ever getting punished for involved inconvenience, rudeness, or expense. They didn't go to church, except maybe on Easter. They didn't have religion as far as I knew, but they did have fun, even if they also had a lot of chaos and problems. We could always count on "Aunt" Bobbi to pile us into the back of her old blue station wagon full of sandy, slightly mildewed beach towels and pineapple sequined bathing caps, to sweep us away for an adventure or a beach picnic.

My friends whose parents weren't divorced were mostly Catholics. They lived by an arcane, but definite, set of rules. At any time, one of them might say "I can't do that. It's against my religion." They said it about wierd things, like reading their horoscope on the comic page of the daily newspaper. Patty Sanderson was Catholic. Her mother went on retreats and looked in a special Catholic newspaper to decide what movies Patty would be allowed to see. Donna Koerner's mom consulted the same newspaper. So did Mary Ann Uhlar's. I don't remember much about their fathers, except for having to consult them, as well as the special newspaper, for permissions.

In those years in America, everybody had a religion. "What are you?" children would ask each other, and you would know to respond with "Catholic," "Presbyterian," "Baptist," or "Methodist." In the town where I grew up, "Jewish" was not an acceptable answer. They were rumored to have killed Christ. I answered "'Piscopalian," when asked, because that's what my mother told me

we were, even though we seldom went to church. My father's family was Jewish, but they never went to church, or temple, either. Neither, I knew, did they kill Christ. They wouldn't kill anybody.

I was permitted to attend church and Bible meetings with my friends, but they were not permitted to attend with their other friends. This struck me as odd, if there was only one God. I enjoyed these gatherings, especially the singing and the stories. Sometimes I longed for the feeling of connection I sensed in other people's religions: the high energy of the songs and the power of strong convictions, or the mysterious sounds and smells of the communion mass. We did not share these in my family, where we were each free to choose our own beliefs. On the other hand, I was grateful that I was not being reared under the seemingly arbitrary and often wounding long arm of the church, which made people's decisions for them for incomprehensible reasons, without knowing their circumstances.

My parents were neither divorced nor religious. They were an exception in this growing Florida boom-town of the new affluence. My parents considered religion a set of beliefs or precepts which you had to swallow whole, in exchange for which you were relieved of the burden of having to figure things out for yourself. They had never come upon a set of beliefs that they were willing to give up thinking for, and they looked with a certain amount of scorn on those who used what they considered a crutch for moral decision making. My parents associated organized religion with fear, dogma, superstition, and hypocrisy, qualities they did not wish to pass on to their daughters. They also took considerable pride in not being "joiners." I tagged along with friends on Sunday mornings to hear stories and sing songs, which my parents considered mostly harmless.

I could see even from my child's vantage point that there were two sides to religion. It is not hard to understand why some people think that religion has

done enough damage in the world, and that the whole of organized religion should be allowed to die. We need only look at the religious fervor of terrorists and suicide bomber as they commit their morally repugnant acts in the name of God, the moral righteousness of the murderers of doctors at abortion clinics and of citizens in Bosnia and Palestine, back to Nazi collaboration, Inquisitions, and witch burnings, to have concerns about the global atrocities committed in the name of religion.

As significant, and often overlooked, are the small, personal indignities committed daily in the name of one religion or another, the young souls broken by the belief that they are "bad " or sinful. Is religion not a breeding ground for self-righteousness, exclusivity, rigidity, and dogma? The gap between professed belief and charitable behavior was evident even to this eight year old. Donna's mother was mean and selfish, even though she was Christian, while my Gram and Pop were generous, even though they weren't. Daddy told me that heaven was like an exclusive country club that kept out Jews and anybody else who was different. He didn't think much of such a place. Besides, I didn't want to go anywhere that Gram and Pop couldn't go with me.

I heard my friends being terrorized with threats of damnation proposed as fitting retribution for normal childhood pranks and pubescent explorations. I watched aghast as an innocent newborn baby had her sins washed away by a priest. I listened over and over again to Bob Dylan wailing "With God On Our Side," a folk song which recounted America's self-righteous atrocities against various peoples, committed "with God on our side," asking ironically if Judas, too, had God on his side when he betrayed Jesus to the Romans. I know well the problems of religion. And still I think we would be mistaken to consign it to history's dustbin.

There is no doubt that religion is a two-edged sword. We do well to question its value. Having a belief system about the world and a set of parameters within which one is expected to operate, can be stifling as well as reassuring. While providing a frame or lens through which to see and evaluate things in the world, that same lens, especially if one does not identify it as a lens, can distort the view of whatever exists inside it and block the view of whatever falls outside its purview.

But as a child growing up during America's Civil Rights Movement, I could also see religion's power to inspire good. Side by side with all the hypocrisy, I saw people, called forth by religious leaders and armed only with their own determination and belief in a God of justice, stand up to police dogs, insults, lynch mobs, and hoses. They drew on the story of the Exodus for inspiration, and they prayed for assistance to the god who led the Jews through the wilderness to the Promised Land. They sang the Gospel songs of endurance that their ancestors had sung in bondage, and the Spirituals that had guided them along the Underground Railroad. As they were subjected to every imaginable indignity, humiliation, imprisonment, and in some cases, even death, they held in their hearts and minds the figure of a savior who suffered and died at the hands of evil and injustice, and triumphed still. That was impressive. Those of us who witnessed the events of the Civil Rights movement experienced the liberating power of faith, community, and story in a way that we were never to forget.

During those formative years, I became fascinated by the dual face of religion: the force for liberation and the force of oppression. I became curious about what accounted for the difference. Why did some people take religion, scripture, and a set of beliefs, and use them in the service of love and liberation, while others could take the same religion, scriptures out of the same book, and the same set of beliefs and stories, more or less, and use them to oppress, repress, and maintain an obviously unjust status quo?

Do we need religion in our world today, and if so, what for? What actually is religion? Where does it come from? Is it merely the "opiate of the masses," as Karl Marx claimed? Is it a superstitious relic of our earlier ignorance? Or can religion provide profound insight into the mind of creation and a call to what is best in us?

The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Paul Tillich once noted that humans seem to have a fundamental need for worship. It is an observable fact that some sort of worship or ritual practice occurs in all cultures, from the most primal to the most highly industrialized. We might posit religious practice as basically human, as our practice seems to precede our cognition. That is, our religious action (ritual or worship) seems to be primary; our theories about our religious action (theology) come after the fact of their enactment, whereby we attempt to explain to ourselves what we do as if by instinct: We ritualize. We worship. We bind ourselves through symbol and story to a larger whole, a higher power. In some times, and in some places, we conceive of this greater whole as the Divine, or God.

Until the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, virtually all humans everywhere practiced some form of what we will define as religion, meaning that all humans had some means by which they related to this greater power, however they understood it. This, in turn, informed their understanding of good and evil, and their place in the world. A fundamental sense of the sacred permeated every aspect of early human culture, making institutionalized religion unnecessary. Any act could be a sacrament, thus providing the means by which to experience the connecting link to the sacred. The first art found on cave walls was magical, sacred art. The first music ever made was music to celebrate the moon and stars, to imitate the mating calls of birds, to invoke the spirit of the sacred animals.

No doubt there was drumming and chanting around the fire from the time that early humans captured and learned to use fire to cook and to warm themselves. Around the safety of the fire, people would make sounds and tones and rhythms that would raise power and make them tingle in their shared experience of communion with something greater, something beyond, something that connected all life. This formed the beginnings of what we would now call religion.

"This is all very well," you may be saying, "but are you not talking about spirituality when you refer to our shamanic roots? I have no trouble with spirituality, but religion . . .well, that's a different matter!" Indeed religion is a very different matter, and an urgent one, if we are to take on the much-needed task of creating common, sustainable values for the twenty first century.

Perhaps in partial reaction to the emptiness and breakdown of our common religious life, spirituality is much in vogue these days. One can walk into any bookstore and find hundreds of titles to choose from, all offering guidance on some inner path to peace, wholeness, wisdom and communion with the inner sacred. One can choose the traditional Western route of contemplative prayer and service, the traditional Eastern route of meditation (in a variety of forms and traditions), Twelve Step programs, dream work, Enneagram, Wiccan ritual, Depth Psychology, Tantric yoga, Shamanic drumming, or even marriage as a spiritual path. One can choose a teacher, a discipline, a dojo, a group, or a favorite place in the woods. The choices are nearly limitless in the possibilities for pursuing ones own spiritual journey, and for developing a spiritual practice. The purpose of such a practice is clear: it is to aid us in our personal connection with the sacred, that which is greater than our everyday selves, however we may conceptualize and use that connection.

Personal spirituality is vital to our well being and to the well being of our institutions. It keeps us in touch with and accountable to our inner life, our

inner sense of truth, and the sacred center from which all wisdom and compassion arises. Religion uninformed by deep spirituality is a dry, brittle, empty shell, which too many people associate with the institutionalized churches of their childhood. However, spirituality without religion soon becomes precious, self-serving, and self-referent, with no communal bonds or accountabilities to hold us in this world. This is what the Conservatives and Fundamentalists rightly fear and criticize: spirituality as personal gratification, devoid of moral import.

This is what Tillich referred to as "spurious spirituality," an illegitimate or false spirituality having no worldly roots or cords. Spirituality is at its heart an intensely private pursuit. It is for this very reason that spirituality alone does not have the social power to encourage us as a people to turn our common culture around toward planetary health, a task we cannot undertake merely one by one, as individuals. Personal spirituality is insufficient ground for our social and moral being in the world. For that larger common ground we need religion.

Religion, from the Latin "re-ligare", means re-binding, implying that somehow, somewhere we came unbound from that early state of wholeness. "Ligare" is also the Latin root of the word "ligament," the tough band of tissue connecting the articular extremities of our bones and holding our organs in place. Our ligaments literally hold our bodies together, as every athlete knows. It is the ligaments, which keep everything in its proper place, allowing the body to use its muscles to do work: to walk, to dance, to build, to climb. Without strong, flexible ligaments, our bodies would be no more than bags of bones with organs, without organization and unable to function.

Likewise, religion provides the common practices, values, beliefs, cosmology, stories, and conceptual framework that bind us to one another and to our world. As ligaments hold our bodies together, religion has held the body politic of every human culture together. Through our practice of religion we bind together

the disparate parts of our complex lives into something coherent and whole, something that makes sense, something that connects with other lives and fits into the order of the world as we know it. Like organs in the body politic of our world, each performing our own particular vital function, we are bound to the bones of society's social structures and institutions, as the bones themselves are held together, by the tough connecting tissue of religion, which binds our individual lives into one functioning body called culture.