

Jenna sang today's song at my request. The song invites us to imagine that there is no religion. Reminds me of a story. Nearly 40 years ago, when Nancy and I were visiting the Congregational Church in Florida which we later joined, the soloist sang that very song in service. I almost laughed out loud at *no religion* being treated in a church service as *something to yearn for*, right along with an end to *greed* and *hunger*. Actually, the fact that that song was greeted calmly by the congregation helped assure us that it was a church we could be comfortable with.

But indeed, should there be religions at all? Are they positive elements of a good society? Should they be treated as special, have tax-exempt status... should gifts to them be deductible? How about the fact that our group is called a *church*? What do we think about the fact that, in one survey, about 60% of Americans were at least wary of a candidate for president who was an atheist, and many were totally opposed? I won't answer those questions, but today and at the end of May, I'll explore some of the issues that surround them.

The themes I'll touch on today are:

1. Religion as tribalism
2. Religion as a source of economic or political power
3. Religion as self enhancement
4. Religion as a source of structure
5. Religion as a source of meaning

The themes for next month include, religion as a coping resource, as entertainment, and as nostalgia.

So am I talking about all religions, or some specific religion? Well, I can only talk about what I know. And what I know is colored by my background, which Jane has already briefed you on.

This topic was sparked a quotation that Mike Ivey included in a weekly reminder he sent us about three years ago. The person being quoted was the Nobel-prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg, who incidentally passed away last year. Here is the famous Weinberg quotation:

With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion. REPEAT

Weinberg is not the only person to have made such an observation. It's often noted, for instance, that many wars have religious undercurrents, including the current one in Ukraine.

Here, we're obviously talking about religion and tribalism, and there are two issues that arise in this context. First, the relation between church and state. And, second, the tendency for religious movements to be torn by schisms and offshoots.

Regarding church and state, you may have heard the Latin phrase ***Cuius regio, eius religio***. In case you're not fluent in Latin, I'll read the first line of the Wikipedia piece on that phrase:

***Cuius regio, eius religio*** literally means "whose realm, their religion" – meaning that the religion of the ruler was to dictate the religion of those ruled

In other words, if you lived in 16th century Europe, and your prince opted for Luther and broke with Rome, you were a protestant all of a sudden—at least in theory. The wars that emerged were, of course, violent and prolonged.

But moving the discussion closer to home, hear the words of Thomas Jefferson, drafted in 1809, regarding religious groups:

in their particular dogmas all differ; no two professing the same. these respect vestments, ceremonies, physical opinions, & metaphysical speculations, totally unconnected with morality, & unimportant to the legitimate objects of society. yet these are the questions on which have hung the bitter schisms of ... Trinitarians, Unitarians, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers E<sup>t</sup>c. ... & what blood, how many human lives have the words 'this do in remembrance of me' cost the Christian world! End quote. Wow.

Note that he was describing conflicts within Christianity, and that Jefferson is clear about what he views as most important, namely *morality and the legitimate objects of society*. (or as we might say, the *needs and goals of civilization*).

You'll perhaps recall that, for a couple days in February, the media focused on the revelation that a certain Father Andres Arango had baptized thousands using the phrase *We baptize you* rather than, *I baptize you*... Jefferson would likely say, this is hardly a matter of morality and the legitimate objects of society. It was not an offense against man, probably not an offense against God either. It was an offence against a religious institution. At least nobody shot anybody as a result, so far as we know.

What about Protestantism? In its early days, Luther was the famous one, but there were other leaders, and they often disagreed with one another or with Luther. Two who were in particular conflict were Zwingli, who was Swiss, and Muntzer, who was German. Their conflict was, among other things, over baptism, as you can discern from this wonderful poem by Phyllis McGinley, entitled *How to Start a War*.

Said Zwingli to Muntzer

I'll have to be blunt, sir

I don't like your version

of Total Immersion.

And since God is on my side

and I'm on the dry side,

you'd better swing ovah

To me and Jehovah.' .....

Cried Muntzer, 'It's schism,

Is infant Baptism!

Since I've had a sign, sir,

That God's will is mine, sir,

Let all men agree

With Jehovah and me,

Or go to Hell, singly,'

Said Muntzer to Zwingli, ...

As each drew his sword

On the side of the Lord.'

The phrase *on the side of the Lord* may bring to mind one of Bob Dylan's best songs from the early 1960s, entitled *With God on Our Side*. It's a powerful anti-war song. It's easy to stream on YouTube, and I recommend it. But we can't talk about religion and war, without quoting from Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, regarding Union vs Confederacy:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered ~ that of neither has been answered fully.

So we're talking about religion and tribalism here. Before we move on, keep in mind that tribes—religious or otherwise, are not necessarily bad things. Tribes can be like extended families, providing a sense of belonging, community, mutual support. Same for churches. But not always. People don't come to church to have their feelings hurt, but it has been known to happen there. In fact, even the little tribes we call families themselves can be pretty anguished—brother against brother, and all the rest. They can break apart—which, of course, relates to the commonness of religious schisms. But another set of problems is evident when tribes are exclusionary and adversarial. When two religiously-defined tribes are fighting for resources, they focus on their differences. The notion of *Godly* us against *Heretical* them can intensify the conflict and the self-righteousness.

The quirky role of religion in tribal conflict is also seen in cases where people claim their conflict is religious, even though they themselves clearly care very little

about religion. This has been seen in the Catholic/Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland—especially among the Protestants, many of whom were much more into dissing the Catholics than they were about actually going to church. Similarly, it appears that a substantial fraction of Americans who count themselves as *religious right evangelicals* have no ongoing involvement with any church at all. It's merely a tribal identifier, a cheap way to indulge in self-righteousness.

Even when religious affiliation does not spawn conflict, it can still draw a line that marks *us from them, insiders vs. outsiders*, as Chris Burcher pointed out last week. Traditionally in protestant America, what denomination you belong to has often a sign of wealth and status—Episcopalian being at the top, and independent Bible churches being much farther down. And it's often been said that Sunday morning is the most racially segregated time of the week in the US. These are complicated matters though, as the official stance of churches is usually “we are open to all”, and no doubt it's often heart-felt. I suspect that there are black people who avoid going to white churches out of fear that they'll be surrounded by an unruly crowd of white people telling yelling *welcome, welcome, welcome*.

The Catholic Church has often done a better job on such matters. Any Catholic in good standing is entitled to attend mass in any Catholic church, with very few exceptions. And in a town like Abingdon, there is just one Catholic church—and it's understood that it will service the religious needs of both rich and poor, Irish and Mexican.

On the other hand, conversion of the natives to Christianity—Catholic Christianity--was the rationale used by the conquistadores for their encroachment

on the Americas 500 years ago. And if you've seen the movie *Spotlight*, about the pedophile priest scandal in Boston, you know of a more recent instance of the Catholic Church's abuse of economic and political power.

The bottom line is that churches are institutions, and institutions take on lives of their own. Regardless of the reasons for which they were created— institutions tend to be self-perpetuating, and to try to keep and gain power. And they often bestow privileges, benefits, and powers upon their own leaders, and so those leaders are motivated to perpetuate not only the institution, but also their own status and power within it.

A decade ago, there was a best-selling book entitled *ZEALOT: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Perhaps you read it. My take-away was that Jesus was actually pretty anti-religion, in the sense that he was critical of people who flaunted their special religious garb, and he scorned the religious muckety-mucks of the day, the scribes and Pharisees. Many versions of Christianity today deserve to be criticized, to a greater or lesser degree, on the very grounds on which Jesus scorned the organized religion into which he was born.

So far I've been musing about the first of my themes: **religion as tribe and religion as power**. Time to move on.

Next is **religion as a form of self-enhancement**, a vehicle for patting oneself on the back. For starters, being a church-goer can be way of asserting your respectability in our culture. But the self-enhancement can also operate on the level of beliefs. You decide what you believe, usually in alignment with some

religious institution, then you praise your own beliefs, and you implicitly praise yourself for believing them. You agree with God, and God agrees with you. Right?

Whenever anyone's rhetoric smacks of that kind of thinking, I feel like saying to them: *What a happy coincidence that you and God just happen to see things in exactly the same way. But... are you sure you're not creating God in your own image?*

Politics gets involved when the beliefs pertain to land claims--territory. Consider the modern history of the State of Israel. I'm happy for the Jewish people to have a place where they can live safely, but I do think it's interesting that God's alleged award of a particular region to the Jews is found in ancient Jewish scripture. It would be more impressive if the Jewish holy books had some information about what land was awarded to the Navahos, or if the award of the region we now call Israel had been promised by God in the Baghivad Gita or whatever. The confluence of what some Jews want and what those Jews insist that God wants is, to say the least, suspect.

At a much broader level, this relates to what Jim Warden said when he spoke to us earlier this month, and I quote: "We [meaning western man] awarded ourselves a license to conquer the Earth" end quote. But of course, western man corralled religion in the process. Listen to the words of Genesis 1:26:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing

Does that strike you as a bit self-serving of homo sapiens

This kind of attitude reaches warp speed when a believer prays for something improbable to happen, then it comes true. At that point, the person can be counted on to be thankful, which is fine, but to also claim that it was an answer to prayer, even a miracle, .... that their prayers had convinced God to interfere with the natural order of things. Does that strike you as a bit arrogant? .... claiming to know exactly what God is intending, what God is thinking. The person may even think that they should be admired for crediting God for the outcome. Well, I do not admire someone for being so sure he knows exactly what God is up to--when, why, where, whatever. To me, it just seems smug. So much for **religion as self-enhancement**.

Next is **religion as a source of structure**. We are social beings, and our societies involve norms. Interpersonal relations work best if there are explicit guidelines, rules of etiquette, rails that we know not to go off of, lines within which we must color, drumbeats to march to, whatever. Inevitably, some of those are going to be arbitrary, but even arbitrary ones can be useful—enough so that we tend sometimes to treat them as *real* rules, not just *rules of thumb*. The question is: where do they come from? What gives them their legitimacy, their authenticity, their force? Well, it's often religion. Religion is often the repository of the legends and myths that make the norms and guidelines come alive and feel authentic.. The problem is, of course, the problem with any set of social regulations. The rules may be too arbitrary and rigid, and they may be enforced in ways that are unjust. What starts as a general template becomes an obligation. It can wind up being a cheap and dirty, fear-based enforcement regime, a way for some members of society to extract resources from other persons. It can be a source of harm. This is the case

with any set of rules, but the potential for harm is amplified when an all-knowing God is invoked, and when the people who enforce the rules can claim that they are just agents of God.

The broader point is that calling something religious sets it apart from the rest of human activity and places it on a higher plane—whether or not it is deserving of that special treatment. I've read discussions of what's wrong with Iran as a nation. It's a place where the religious establishment has real hard power, not just the kind of soft power that religion has in American politics. Shiite clerics have influence throughout the governing structure. Often this means that they commonly have jobs for which they are ill-qualified. Clerics who are non-engineers are given jobs that require the skills of an engineer, and so on. It's a real problem if your goal is to have an effective and efficient civil service. Not that it's all that different from everyday nepotism and cronyism, but it's a real problem. Moving on.

Last, for today, we turn to **religion as a source of meaning and purpose.**

This is the last one we'll get to today. I start with a joke you've all likely heard:

What do you get when combine a Jehovah's Witness with a Unitarian?

Someone who goes around knocking on doors for no apparent reason.

So what about reasons, and purposes and meaning? Let's start with a poem by Kurt Vonnegut:

Tiger got to hunt, bird got to fly;

Man got to sit and wonder 'why, why, why? '

Tiger got to sleep, bird got to land;

Man got to tell himself he understand.

Here Vonnegut seems to be saying that humans have a need for closure, a need to stop asking. Religion obviously meets that need, in the sense that religion does not just suggest possible answers, it claims to have the final answers. Is that so bad? Could be worse, I suppose, but I for one think that telling myself *I understand* is too much like a stopping point, it's an unnecessary dead end, it stifles curiosity, it's a case of premature closure.

I'm glad, for instance, there were people who, when faced with questions about our origins, did not just read the book of Genesis and say, *Case closed, now I understand why, thank you very much Mr. Vonnegut*. Instead, starting mainly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they developed sciences such as geology and paleontology. They generated new understandings, and they are seeking ever better ones as we speak. And they are committed to the notion that their current understandings are provisional, subject to revision on the basis of new data, new findings. Put that in your pipe and smoke it Kurt Vonnegut.

We are, of course, talking about the issue of *religion vs. science* as sources of ultimate understanding. I'll admit that there are some questions that science may never answer and for which religion does offer answers. Still, my bottom line is that, when given the choice, I'll always favor *natural* over *supernatural* explanations, and I'll always favor *the most recent findings of science* over *what is suggested in the ancient manuscripts*, religious or otherwise.

This business of what we rely on for our understanding of things is, in my view a clue to a lot of the cross-currents in our society's response to a person like Anthony Fauci. Some people, including some religious leaders, see someone like

him as a threat to their own standing as sources of wisdom. Over the last two years, the more often Fauci has been right in his assessments, the more fiercely some on the religious right have vilified him. He is the competition.

At this point, I've obviously drifted back to one of the entries earlier on my list, namely religion as a vehicle that some people use to maintain power and control—and what happens when this power comes into conflict with the fundamental irrationality of many religious claims. It's true of Christianity, and I suspect true of all religions, that it grew up topsy-turvy, such that it's impossible to weave all its threads into a coherent fabric. It's partly that the big thing is to believe, and whether or not it makes sense is secondary. In this respect, religion is a lot like many secular ideologies. Part of the problem with religion, however, is that so many religious beliefs about the world were developed, and became solidified, in the pre-scientific era, when what we'd now view as magical thinking was rampant, an era in which the boundary between religion and superstition was very porous.

In some ways, it seems that the question is: is it possible to be both religious and modern?

I leave you with that big question. Is it possible to be both religious and modern?

