

As with my talk a month ago, today I'm trying to sort out a response to John Lennon's musical challenge for us to *imagine there's no religion*. Europe has been drifting toward no religion for decades, and, regarding the US, this statement appeared in the NYTimes in an article two weeks ago: [Quote}

Many churches are fragile, with attendance far below prepandemic levels; denominations are shrinking, and so is the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian. Forty-two percent of Protestant pastors said they had seriously considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year. [End quote]

I considered reading that statement during our joys and concerns time, then calling for a vote as to whether it is a joy or a concern. Of course, how you vote might on what qualifies as *religion*. More about that at the end of the talk.

A month ago, my topics included religion as tribalism, economic or political power, self-enhancement, and as a source of structure and meaning. I ended that talk with the question: *Is it possible to be both religious and modern?* I was making the point that religions often press us to believe things that are pretty incongruous. To reiterate that point, I want to share a quip made by the brilliant cartoonist Jules Pfeiffer: [Quote]

*Christ died for our sins. Dare we make his martyrdom meaningless by not committing them?*

It's a profound question. It's obviously witty, but I'm not sharing it to make you laugh. I do not believe in mocking beliefs. I share it just to emphasize my point that it's hard to find meaning in a belief system that regularly defies reason.

So anyway, here is my list of topics to touch upon today. There are nine:

1. Religion as a coping resource
2. Religion as a way of staying out of hell
3. Religion as something for children
4. Religion as a marketable commodity
5. Religion as a solemnizer
6. Religion as an intensifier
7. Religion as entertainment
8. Religion as nostalgia
9. Religion as a source of morality

So, first: ***Religion as a coping resource***, a source of solace and strength.

What comes to mind is Karl Marx's famous assertion that *religion is the opiate of the people*. Marx may have been a bit cynical, and he had some pretty unrealistic notions of the forces of history, but he definitely was an acute observer of human behavior.

But, for a less cynical take on the matter, I share a personal story: When Nancy and I lived in Miami, she had a close friend and colleague whose husband was murdered brutally, leaving their three teenage children fatherless. The husband was a Baptist minister and his wife, Nancy's friend, was also very devout. Nancy observed how important this woman's faith was in helping her through this horrific

tragedy, and in dealing with its wake. Nancy and I were, of course, glad for her, maybe even a bit envious. But my response is to say: *I don't see that that kind of faith would work for me in a time of crisis. That's my problem. If works for you, go for it. If you would feel better knowing that I'm praying for you, I'll pray for you. Whatever.* Sometimes life is indeed hard, and I'm not one to scorn what religion offers some people as a way of coping.

That said, there is something a bit perverse about how some religious messaging emphasizes the wretchedness of human existence—as if to enhance the importance of religion as a source of relief. It's a bit like the law-and-order candidate who exaggerates the prevalence of violent crime to drum up support for his candidacy.

Number 2: ***Religion as a way of staying out of hell.*** Yes, that is one thing that people turn to religion for. But there is a problem here: if there were no religion in the first place, there likely would be no fear of hell, no reason to turn to religion to deal with that fear. About the best thing you can say about the notion of hell is that *it's one helluva marketing device.*

I don't want to overstate. Even people who have had no exposure to religion and who have zero fear of hell, sometimes do fear death, and religion sometimes helps deal with that too. A religion can be attractive simply because it offers a vision of an appealing hereafter.

Number 3: ***Religion as something for the children.*** A standard caricature of Catholicism involves a stern nun standing with a ruler over a child, usually a boy. There is a classic cartoon by John Calahan in this genre, in which the boy's

punishment is to write over and over the following words: *I am personally responsible for all of Christ's suffering.* I'd thought of that as just a great joke, but in a *NY Times* column earlier this month Gail Collins shared her personal recollection of being a student in a Catholic high school around 1960 and of [quote]

being marched into the auditorium for a lecture from a visiting cleric who assured us that when Jesus was dying on the cross, he was tortured by a vision of the sins of mankind — notably adolescent girls “making out with boys in the back seat of a car.”

A Protestant story that comes to mind is not as lurid, but it's from my own experience. When I was in my 20s, I was a church organist. One Sunday, when the service had ended and the sanctuary had cleared, a 4-year-old boy who had presumably been in Sunday school during service had wandered off from his parents and was watching me as I locked the organ and put the key in the seat. I told him that this was my where I hid the key, and that now he and I were the only two people who knew this secret. I was hoping it would make him feel special, but his response, was: *No, there's someone else who knows it too.*

I said, *Who?*

He said: *Jesus. Jesus knows all our secrets.* End of story.

So there you have it. Religion as a way of enforcing good behavior through fear.

There are, of course, plenty of mainstream America families in which the parents rarely darken the church door—but still take their kids to church for Sunday school, or youth group, or whatever. I never quite understood that. Maybe the parents just want the kids out of the house for a couple of hours. Maybe they

have some vague sense that it would be a positive influence. Maybe they feel that children are not really educated unless they know the stories of the prevailing religious tradition. Nancy and I certainly took our kids to Sunday School when we went to church, and we sent them to youth group when they were teens. Whether it succeeded in educating and acculturation them, I cannot say. Would our kids recognize the Lords Prayer, or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, or the Beatitudes? I don't know. Maybe, now that they're in their 40s, I'll quiz them. If they fail, I'll view it as an educational lapse, but roughly on a par with, say, not being able to recognize the difference between Bach's music and that of Beethoven. In other words, regrettable, but nothing horrendous, in my view.

Moving on, parents also use religion to help children deal with loss and death—encapsulated in the following statement. *We're all so sad that granddad has died, but he is in a better place. He's with God. He's in heaven.* We don't have time to explore the pros and cons of such ploys, other than to say, just as I'm pretty sure that Nancy and I never told our kids that a scary God was snooping on them, nor did we tell them that anyone was in heaven. Yes, there were times when our kids grieved deeply, but we found other ways of helping them deal with loss.

There is, of course, a key problem to dealing with children in a patronizing way when it comes to religion. Years ago, a friend told me of something his younger brother had said at about the age of 8.

First you admitted that the Tooth Fairy isn't real

Then you said that the Easter Bunny wasn't either.

Then you confessed that even Santa Claus wasn't real.

So when are you going to admit that God isn't real either?

Before we move on, let's keep in mind that any and all of us may feel a lot like a child at various times on our adult lives, and there are moments we may crave *simple* answers and we may take comfort in them. Nothing to be ashamed of there.

Number 4: ***Religion as part of the market economy.*** First an anecdote. In the summer of 2014, we visited some dear friends in Ireland. The husband went to Sunday mass and came back amazed at something that had happened. The priest had begun the service by greeting everyone warmly, thanking them for being there. In a lifetime of attending Catholic churches in England, the US and Ireland, our friend had never heard a priest do that before. The unspoken message had always been: *of course you are here.* But the church was losing a lot of status and power within Irish culture, so the priest was acting the way protestant pastors have in the US for a long time—as if he were, in part, a friendly salesman, which makes sense if the church is just another thing for sale within in service sector of the economy.

When it comes to religion, it's generally a buyer's market these days. There are a lot of churches you can go to, each with lots empty seats with an unobstructed view. We're talking competition here. The Methodists are competing not just with the devil, but also with the hard-shell Methodists down the street and the progressive Methodists around the block, not to mention all the other denominations. It's partly competition for the tithes and offerings needed to pay the salaries and utilities and to service the mortgage, but it's not just that. Even a church with a huge endowment ceases to exist unless it has people.

Even in the best of days, religion has a general tendency to promise more than it can deliver—more joy, more contentment, whiter whites, whatever. Move over Madison Avenue. It's most evident in hymns and Gospel songs, but the roots of oversell go way back. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is beautiful poetry, and I'd be happy for it be read at my funeral. But, lets face it, it begins with an exaggerated promise.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*O really*, never want anything? Quite a grand claim. Maybe the psalmist was going for a placebo effect, but still. What great ad-copy! Or what about the string of absolutes and superlatives used in describing God—all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, all-loving, totally just, and so on. As I say, move over Madison Avenue.

In the contemporary American, churches must adapt or die. Evangelical churches used to be noted for their rousing Sunday evening services, but these seem to have fallen to the competition. Competition from what? Not from some other denomination. It's more likely from the National Football League.

As I noted earlier, these are not fun days to be a pastor, especially if you hope to put food on the table for your family, whatever. Sometimes pastors are caught between market pressures and conscience. Pastors who let their consciences influence what they say will sooner or later offend someone, someone whose pledge payments matter. It's no wonder that pastors sometimes play it safe—and rely on bland content, presented in an entertaining style.

There is, of course, something wrong with a picture in which a church has to mold itself to popular preferences in order to survive. But that is always a possibility when you have freedom of religion. Unfortunately, it encourages not

only blandness but also tribalism. How? The best way to market yourself is by focusing on what makes you distinctive. It's called product differentiation. Here's an example: I had a friend in college named Judy. Like many students in that college, Judy grew up in a small evangelical church in a small town in New England, and she'd just come back from Easter break. I asked: How was your break? And she looked at me glumly and said: On Easter Sunday morning the pastor preached about how much better our church is because it doesn't not have a fellowship hall with a kitchen--*we're not like those other churches that are really just social clubs*, and so on and so on. Since celebration of the resurrection did not distinguish this church from the others, why even bother mentioning it on Easter Sunday?

So what about our church, UUCH? We're generally in the same competitive boat, and we are definitely at risk. But we have some advantages. First, no other nearby church is similar enough to us to be a real competitor. Product differentiation is not our problem, though we do still have a competitor called *no church at all*. Second, we have a low-maintenance physical facility on which there is no mortgage and no pastor, so our budget is tiny compared to that of most churches. Also, we can be proud that we do not rely on exaggerated promises. We do not, after all, promise that by being a member of this church, you will experience full-time joy and contentment. None of these advantages guarantees survival though, and I think most of us would like for our group not merely to survive, but to thrive.

Number 5: ***Religion as solemnizing***. The first time I heard the verb *solemnize* was in a lecture about separation of church and state. The question was: *Can you have prayers in tax-funded contexts?* The speaker's answer, was: *Yes, but*

*only if it is a solemnizing prayer, which he distinguished from a Come-to-Jesus prayer.*

Indeed, prayers and religious talk can lend an air of importance and gravity to an event. We humans do like our ceremonies, don't we? Holding an event in a church is another way of solemnizing it. There are lots of families that engage with religion only at times of marriage, baptism, and death, and they do so because births, marriages, and deaths are the really big events in life, worthy of being solemnized. This can leave churches in a quandary though. If people turn to them only at such times, who is going to pay the salaries and the building mortgage?

But, of course, people are finding alternative ways of solemnizing key events—even funerals. In fact, funeral homes are explicit in providing options for people who lack a church connection. At which point we're back to the market economy, aren't we?

Number 6: ***Religion as an intensifier***, by which I mean an amplifier or a supercharger or an accelerant. My own scholarly writing has been in the area of delusions, and it turns out that some persecutory delusions have religious overtones. What's interesting is that delusions with religious overtones are particularly rigid and fixed, less susceptible to change. Religion is, as I say, an intensifier.

Of course, some religions openly encourage persecutory thinking. The sayings attributed to Jesus known as the Beatitudes are mostly upbeat, but there is one that is not: {Quote}

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

It's almost as if Jesus was encouraging people to embrace victimhood. Not a good move, in my humble opinion.

But it's not just delusions that religion can intensify. In our current landscape what religion is obviously intensifying is political polarization. Religion can fuel hatred, it provides a language in which you can call your enemy evil. Claiming that God is on your side can be a wonderful path to self-inflation, self-righteousness, and smugness. This relates to religion as tribalism, which I discussed last month.

Number 7. ***Religion as entertainment.*** I'll be quick on this one. I'm told that, if you're trying to build a mega-church from scratch, the most important early capital expenditure is a sound system, and the most important early part-time hires are the musicians for your praise band. Whether it's a mass at St. Peter's in Rome or Sunday morning at Highlands Fellowship, services are a form of musical theatre. They are scripted and the music involves a rehearsed performance. Those who lead often dress the part, whether it's a robe embroidered with gilt thread, or a cowboy outfit. It's musical theatre.

Number 8, ***Religion as nostalgia.*** This March, Bob Hill touched on this when he spoke of his grandmother's religion. A week or so after that, Harry Baya sang *Will the Circle be Unbroken?* When I was a kid, the Sunday breakfast routine in our house involved listening to the Old Fashioned Revival Hour on the radio, broadcast from Long Beach Auditorium in California. Despite its name, the style was not so much *old* as *rural, farm-country, middle-America, camp-meeting*, what have you. For listeners around the country in the 1950s, Long Beach California sounded

very, very cool, so the Old Fashioned Revival Hour was both nostalgic and cool at the same time. What a winning combination. Time to move over again, Madison Avenue.

Not that there is anything wrong with nostalgia. When it comes to religion, people want their experience to be authentic, and deep roots in the past can be a mark of authenticity. But the question is: Whose tradition is *the* authentic one?

When Nancy and I were in Miami, there was a small group of traditional Catholics, who were fanatically opposed to all Vatican II innovations. They would show up at Sunday masses to disrupt things by yelling out the words of the liturgy in Latin. I guess this was their version of the song *Gimme That Old Time Religion*. As they say, *et cum spiritu tuo*.

Finally, number 9, **Religion as a source of morality**, a way of understanding values, ethics, good vs. bad. I'll be quick on this one. I approve. This is the aspect of religion that I am most comfortable with—in the case of Christianity, the Golden Rule, love your neighbor as yourself, etc. But we humans seem to have a great talent for viewing our allies as virtuous and our enemies as evil. Any system of morality worth embracing is one that reminds us of what is bad about me and my tribe, and what is good about our adversaries. So often, it seems like all the other facets of religion eclipse the moral one.

Time to wrap it up. At the beginning of my talk a month ago I quoted Steven Weinberg. These were his words:

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. [End quote]

Weinberg was a world-class physicist, but then another world-class physicist, a man named Freeman Dyson, weighed in. This is what Dyson said:

Weinberg's statement is true as far as it goes, but it is not the whole truth. To make it the whole truth, we must add an additional clause: "And for bad people to do good things—that takes religion"

So put it together, and it reads as follows:

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

I'll buy that, except I'd add a third clause—one that acknowledges that a lot of religious involvement doesn't push the needle in either direction. When he spoke to us in March, Richard Brian began by recalling that, when he was a young man going to a Presbyterian church, religion made little apparent difference in the lives of the other members. For religion to cause anyone to do good or evil requires engagement. People can belong to a particular religious group while failing to engage with its teachings. What comes to mind here is how little most Americans know about the basic Christianity, and that includes Bible thumping evangelicals. One wonders if all it amounts to is tribalism and musical theatre.

But back to where I stand on these matters. I've previously shared my view of theocracy from this "pulpit", and I'll repeat what I said since it holds the key to my view on religion more broadly. So what's my line about theocracy?

When friends complain about the religious right trying to turn our country into a theocracy, I install my tongue firmly in my cheek and respond: *I have*

*no problem with theocracy. Living in world run by God would be wonderful,  
just as long as no people are involved.*

My point is, of course, is that the problem with religion is that, even if there is a God, and if that God sometimes intervenes in human affairs, religious activities are very human. They have the same drawbacks found in all other human activities and institutions. Religion does have positive aspects, no one of which is unique to religion. As with the little girl with the curl right in middle of her forehead, when religion is good it can be very good indeed, but when it is bad it can be horrid.

I'd like to end by reciting the quotation with which Bill Chamberlain began last week's service. The words are from Bishop John Shelby Spong: [quote]

The task of religion is not to turn us into proper believers; it is to deepen the personal within us, to embrace the power of life, to expand our consciousness, in order that we might see things that eyes do not normally see.

To that I say: Amen. And if that's the kind of religion that's in decline, it's not a joy at all. It's a concern.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/06/opinion/us-israel-elections.html>

Religions are not revealed: they are evolved. If a religion were revealed by God, that religion would be perfect in whole and in part, and would be as perfect at the first moment of its revelation as after ten thousand years of practice. There has never been a religion that fulfills those conditions. -Robert Blatchford, journalist and author (17 Mar 1851-1943)

How to Pray to a God You Don't Believe In  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/02/opinion/god-evil-problem.html?referringSource=articleShare>