

## **“A Religion Worthy of Pride”**

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**August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

### **Meditation:**

Hypothetical scenario: Sometime in the future, generations from now, religion as we know it, is being abandoned. All the institutions are being disassembled. The property and possessions being sold off. Everything is being collected and divided up. And in the midst of all this processing and sorting, at the bottom of the whole kit and caboodle, is a box. Pad locked and dusty, it appears to have never been opened. On its front it reads: ‘Owner’s Manual.’

Two questions I want to pose today: Why, do you imagine, is religion being dismantled? And what do the instructions say?

One reason, of course, that the world would discard religion is that it failed to do its job. Perhaps it never even figured out what its job was in the first place.

Interesting questions. Partly wondering why religion would be abandoned... But even more, what, all along, could we say is the purpose of religion? It is all too easy for us to contemplate, ‘what has religion done wrong?’ There are many answers to that and few of them are helpful. What is important is to find an answer to the question: ‘what would religion have been doing if it ‘got it right?’’ Would it still have been abandoned?

Has religion just been about teaching us to dress up and look nice and get together? A reason that we go to see our friends – the people who are ‘like-minded’ and agree with us? A way to help us feel good about ourselves? A system to help justify our way of thinking and acting in the world?

These are all fine, I suppose. But I think it’s reasonable to expect the owner’s manual to say a little bit more. More about understanding our lives and our relationships. More about our human purpose and how to develop it. More about the true nature of strength and power – as well as weakness and suffering – and the relationship between them. More about understanding our need for security and how to find it in a volatile world. More about a moral response to evil. More about how to open ourselves to strangers - and ideas that feel strange. More about ethical responses to conflict. More about resolving our differences by means other than war. Because it’s not enough, these days, to feel good about ourselves, look nice and hang out with our friends if we can’t stop fighting with everyone else.

What is religion’s job? What would we really be doing if we suddenly started following the owner’s manual? What would we be doing, as religious people – if we got it right? What would a religion we could all be proud of be asking us to do?

### **Sermon:**

It would be nice, wouldn’t it, to have a real instruction manual for religion. I don’t mean what most people – especially in the bible beltway - have been calling an instruction manual – which is usually little more than a set of interpretive claims used to justify their own prejudices. I mean some real truth. A set of religious laws that are reasonably reliable – that explain - even predict - the nature of cause and effect in human relationships. An explanation of some ethical code of conduct that are consistent – like the laws of physics - that could help us set our sights on something – say a commitment to mutual compassion and peaceful co-existence – and know what to do to pull it off.

I think it would be nice to have some manual that helped us see that religion can be something more than ‘an opiate of the masses.’ That could help us aspire to more than forging a good defense of our pre-conceptions and a good reason for getting together with like minded people. It would be nice to have something that would help us learn how to be humble without being a doormat for the rest of the world. And how we could cultivate the power of our convictions, without resorting to arrogance and oppressing others.

I have felt that need for a long time. But I can remember coming to a keen awareness of that need in my teenage years – the time when most of us were steeped in idealism and questioning authority and asking, questions like ‘why can’t we all just get along?’ and ‘how come we haven’t figured out \_\_\_\_\_?’ I had a lot of questions for religion then. But I can remember having one particularly religious experience one day while sitting on the couch, eating pop tarts and watching science fiction on TV.

A movie was on from 1951, one of the first in a long line of movies about people from other planets who come to earth and asked questions about ethics. The movie – some of you might have seen it - was called “The Day the Earth Stood Still.”

It involves a huge flying saucer landing in Washington D.C., setting off a huge panic. In response, the military arrives and surrounds the ship. Soldiers and tanks and guns face it from every angle. Everyone’s anxiety jumps up when a small opening appears and a ramp extends out from the ship. A humanoid looking alien, named ‘Klaatu’ emerges. But before he can walk the length of the ramp, a nervous soldier shoots him. Klaatu’s loyal robot, Gort, rushes to his rescue and begs Klaatu to let him decimate the entire planet. Klaatu refuses and agrees instead to go with the humans to Walter Reed Hospital where they fix him up. There, Klaatu tries to talk to his hosts and arrange for a meeting with all the world leaders saying he wants to help them find more peaceful solutions to their problems and help them see the consequences of their aggressive and violent tendencies. Unfortunately, the leaders simply argue amongst themselves and fail to agree on which of them should be attending the meeting or, even, in what country they should gather.

Klaatu, in a moment of great profundity says, “I’m impatient with stupidity. My people have learned to live without it.”

The movie continues with Klaatu escaping from the hospital, hiding out in a boarding house, befriending a young boy, and contacting a scientist - in the hopes that, perhaps, the scientific community can help move the world toward peace. But, being the skeptics they are, they need convincing this is all on the level. So, Klaatu shuts down all power on earth for a half hour – hence the title of the movie. This gets their attention, but before he can pass on any helpful insights, Klaatu is hunted down and killed. He is, again, brought back to life by his trusty robot, Gort, whereupon they both leave discouraged. But not before Klaatu addresses a world audience warning the earth that unless its people stop their nuclear frenzy, which also threatens the rest of the universe, they will be destroyed. “The choice,” declares Klaatu, “is yours.”

So you can see how, as a pop-tart loving teenager, I worked myself into a fit of moral indignation and anger at the world – and science and religion in particular to whom I attributed a liberal amount of responsibility. But, when I think back on that time, what strikes me most – aside from the cruel irony that I would grow up to have careers in both science and religion, was the fact the movie was made in 1951 – just six years after atomic weapons were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The movie was intended as an indictment - an ethical challenge – reminding people that the choice is still ours – and we still haven’t been having the important conversations.

This coming week is the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of those atomic bombs. All most all of us here grew up during the cold war. We all know what it is like to live with the constant threat of decimation. I think we can all relate to Klaatu's frustration, for we are impatient with stupidity too.

And two generations have slipped by without answers. Just as the movie demonstrated, science hasn't responded to the ethical challenge. We have spent – and continue to spend – billions of dollars on weaponry, seeking a sense of security. But it has done very little to help us understand how to resolve conflict. It has only made us much better at waging war.

Like the movie said, 'the choice is ours.' But when the problem is stated in terms of relationship – with elements of love and fear, power and frailty, oppressors and oppressed, good and bad – it's hard to blame science. After all, science has no formula. There are no scientific units for love or fear.

Which is why I believe it is really a challenge for religion. One in which the future of not only religion hangs in the balance, but the future of civilization. For years we have turned, unsuccessfully, to science for help because of its reliability. Its concreteness. We seem to have concluded that religion has little accountability. What we need is for religion, like science, to have a set of reliable ethical formulas – some concrete approach that offers universally predictable outcomes like physical laws. But we seem to have resigned that religion can not possibly come up with such laws. For, if it could, all religions would have discovered them.

Which is exactly what they HAVE done, according to George Ellis – 2004 Templeton Prize winner for Progress in the development of spiritual realities. Ellis is a professor of applied mathematics specializing in theoretical cosmology at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. He is also co-author of the book, On the Moral Nature of the Universe.

Describing himself as a "moral realist," Ellis argues that ethics, like mathematics, is a part of the universe that we discover rather than dream up or invent. That the laws that help us address conflict in reasonably predictable and successful ways have always existed – even if they have only recently been discovered and only seldom employed. He contends that– like physical laws – they are built into the very fabric of the universe. And at their very core of those laws is a principle known as Kenosis.

For us to understand Kenosis, it's helpful to know a little bit more about where Ellis encountered this principle and began applying it. As a native of South Africa, Ellis was witness to horrible oppression and violence during the rise of apartheid. He developed a conviction to seek some pragmatic, ethical response to the inhumanity that was tearing apart his homeland.

He began to notice the Quakers and how they employed a consistent tact of non-violence and compassion as a religious antidote to this oppression. The Quaker approach appealed to him since, like Unitarian Universalism, it took a non-doctrinal approach to religion and welcomed – even encouraged - his rational scientific outlook on the world.

He understood that the Quakers were simply adopting a particular ethic of Jesus – though, as he went deeper, he also discovered that nearly every religion talks about a similar ethic. Even world leaders employed such principles – including Gandhi in his efforts to free the Indians from British rule, Martin Luther King, Jr. working for civil rights and, in his native South Africa, Nelson Mandela and Stephen Biko who sought to end apartheid.

The concept relies on the observable reality that the continuation of oppression and tyranny depend on violence begetting violence. But a ethical response that can reduce – even end – the conflict can forged

with forgiveness and unconditional positive regard. The word Kenosis is a Greek word found in the New Testament and refers to Jesus' method of dealing with the oppressive powers of Roman rule and religious orthodoxy. It literally means 'to empty oneself' as a response to violence, meaning emptying the self of ego and pride that demand retaliation and retribution. It offers an alternative to the mental, emotional and spiritual prison of hatred which perpetuates the continual and contagious development of enmity justifying violence.

The kenotic prescription to oppression varies in degrees on a spectrum ranging from a simple practice of forgiveness and letting go of hate and revenge, to extreme cases of ultimate sacrifice where a life is sacrificed for the hope that others will seek freedom from the cycle.

Rarely that extreme, kenosis is much easier to relate to in its more daily application – which is the basic work of relationship and community building, and the balancing self interests with the good of others. In other words, being able to let go of pride when it prompts us toward acts of retaliation.

It helps when we realize that Kenosis is a generic principle which is much wider than just ethics. In this way it is like a universal law that applies to all things. It is about emptying, so it relates to *anything* having to do with education, learning and transformation. If you go into any learning situation holding tightly to a preconceived notion, you can't learn. You have to empty your mind of all preconceived notions before you can learn anything new. In ethics the key point of kenosis is that it is the willingness to give up something – to sacrifice something - which prepares us for contact with the human part of another other person.

In situations of conflict it's sort of like moral jujitsu in that the person you are in conflict with is usually expecting you to react defiantly. They are expecting you to be their enemy. When you refuse to be their enemy, they become confused – and it is at that point they are most susceptible to accepting the possibility of positive regard as opposed to negative action.

Kenosis is based on the premise that before any one engaging in conflict can experience a change of heart, before they can be convinced to renounce their part of the oppression, they have to receive some response from the other person that indicates positive regard instead of the enmity they are expecting. Signs of care give the oppressor the opportunity to see the oppressed in a different way.

A great example of this kenotic philosophy came up in the teacher training we held at UUMAN, yesterday. We were talking about how you might get fourteen 12 year old children who are about to tie you up and take you hostage – how do you get them to listen to you. And one of our brilliant new teachers related a quote that reveals tremendous insight into the mind of a child in such a moment. The quote was, "I don't care how much you know, until I know how much you care." It is true for anyone who initiates conflict. All our resisting, screaming, ignoring them and running away won't help them seek a better way. It's necessary to show we care.

Ellis points out that the kenotic process operates on all levels – from children to even the largest conflicts. He makes this very interesting point by relating the differences between the endings of the first and the second world war.

The first world war ended with the treaty of Versailles, which was a very vengeful treaty in which no kenosis was evident. It was a treaty which punished not only the leaders of the conflict, but the entire country of Germany as well. It responded to the conflict by perpetuating the same bitterness, resentment and oppression that raged through the war. Thus the German people held onto a sense of resentment.

Hitler amplified this resentment and desire for retaliation in his rise to power and the entire climate of righteous indignation is what practically guaranteed the second world war would take place.

At the end of the second world war, however, the story was different. Although the leaders were held to account, and some even executed, the population at large was not treated with vengeance. The Marshall plan involved extensive investment and re-building of German and other European lands - far from what people expected. It created a climate where judgment was reserved and eventually suspended. A perfect example of kenosis which seemed to guarantee a peace that, until that unexpected moment, few people could imagine.

But perhaps one of the best examples of kenosis in a time of war is chronicled in a letter sent to Ellis by someone after they came to hear him speak. This person was grateful that he finally had a name for the miraculous example of sacrifice he had witnessed years earlier. The letter read:

In 1967 I was a young officer in a Scottish battalion engaged in peacekeeping duties in Aden town - what is now Yemen. The situation was similar to Iraq, with people being killed every day. As always, those who suffered the most were the innocent local people. Not only were we tough, but we had the power to pretty well destroy the whole town had we wished.

But we had a commanding officer who understood how to make peace, and he led us to do something very unusual, not to react when we were attacked. Only if we were 100 percent certain that a particular person had thrown a grenade or fired a shot at us were we allowed to fire. During our tour of duty we had 102 grenades thrown at us, and in response the battalion fired the grand total of two shots, killing one grenade-thrower. The cost to us was over 100 of our own men wounded, and surely by the grace of God only one killed. When they threw rocks at us, we stood fast. When they threw grenades, we hit the deck and after the explosions we got to our feet and stood fast. We did not react in anger or indiscriminately. This was not the anticipated reaction. Slowly, very slowly, the local people began to trust us and made it clear to the local terrorists that they were not welcome in their area.

At one stage, when neighboring battalions were having a torrid time with attacks, we were playing soccer with the locals. We had, in fact, brought peace to the area at the cost of our own blood. How had this been achieved? Principally because we were led by a man whom every soldier in the battalion knew would die for him if required. Each soldier in turn came to be prepared to sacrifice himself for such a man. Many people may sneer that we were merely obeying orders, but this was not the case. Our commanding officer was more highly regarded by his soldiers than any general, one must almost say loved. So gradually the heart of the peacemaker began to grow in each man and determination to succeed in peace whatever the cost. Probably most of the soldiers, like myself, only realized years afterwards what had been achieved.

What is it that we are gathered to do here? What is our purpose? What is it that religion is supposed to achieve?

One of the marks of deep religion is paradox. One of the paradoxical truths of religion is that the true nature of power is in a willingness to vulnerable to suffering and experiencing – even just witnessing that willingness is transformative. We may look around our world and see the fear and recognize that what most people are really looking for is reassurance and security. But what is the true nature of security?

The answer is quite simple: you are secure when you have no enemies. The only way to have no enemies is to change your enemies into friends. And the only way to have a religion we can all be proud of is when we all empty ourselves of the pride that prompts us to pursue conflicts.

Kenosis is part of the great paradox of religion – and part of the undeniable laws that govern the universe. The idea that it has been discovered in so many different places, independently... seeing it as part of so many different religions simultaneously... is what leads Ellis to the assertion that it is not just a clever idea, but part of the ethical fabric of the universe – just waiting to be discovered.

“Take for example people in other galaxies,” claims Ellis. “If we were one day ready to make contact with those people, we are reasonably sure that we would be able to have a conversation about mathematics because we are confident that they would have to know such a language in order to advance to a level capable of communicating with other galaxies. But, if the conversation were to somehow turn to the topic of relationship and behavior, isn’t it also reasonable to expect that they would have to speak the language of kenotic ethics, for it is unlikely without it, they would have survived to that point.”

Just as it is unlikely, that we – on this planet – are likely to survive without it. Like the alien Klaatu warned us: ‘The choice is ours.’

This morning, I would like to posit the possibility that the question of what’s in the box – what is it that the owner’s manual says – what religion is really supposed to be doing – is a rather rhetorical question. Though the words may vary from religion to religion, our call has something to do with the principle of kenosis.

The more telling question, perhaps, is ‘why will religion be abandoned?’ Will it be because we failed to follow the instructions and could not prevent the destruction of the world? Or will it be because we discovered the ethical fabric of the universe that ties us all together? Will it be because we someday find a way to practice kenosis so completely that we discovered that we no longer need religious institutions to remind us of the laws of ethics – that those ethics are written on our hearts that have learned to have no walls?

Let us hope – and strive – for the latter. That we may one day run out of places on this earth that still practice stupidity and war. And seek new places in the universe to carry our love.

To the Glory of Life.