

Source of All Goodness?

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Readings

Jews have just completed their celebration of Rosh Hashanah and, yesterday, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. During this period Jews are meant to reflect on how they have lived their lives during the year past, and to resolve to do better in the year to come. Here is a passage from the Talmud, based on centuries of oral tradition of reflection and debate among Jewish scholars from ancient times until the middle ages:

When our learning exceeds our deeds we are like trees whose branches are many but whose roots are few: the wind comes and uproots them... But when our deeds exceed our learning we are like trees whose branches are few but whose roots are many, so that even if all the winds of the world were to come and blow against them, they would be unable to move them.

Muslims have begun the month of Ramadan. It is a month of fasting during daylight hours, a month where believers are meant to turn their attention toward God, a month where the giving of alms or charity – which is a pillar of Islam all the time – is especially encouraged. Here is Mohammed speaking of almsgiving in the *Hadith*, the collection of the sayings of Mohammed:

If you straighten our some trouble between two individuals, that is an alms. If you help a lame man with his beast, mounting him thereon, or hoisting up on to it his baggage, that is an alms. A good word is an alms. In every step you take while walking to prayers there is an alms.

Your smiling in your brother's face, is charity; and your exhorting humanity to virtuous deeds, is charity; and your prohibiting the forbidden, is charity; and your showing others the road, in the land in which they lose it, is charity; and your assisting the blind, is charity.

Sermon

Is *religion* the source of all goodness?

If not, what *is* the source of all goodness?

We have just heard two readings concerning good behavior, both of which are religious texts.

We heard the Talmud assert that deeds (good deeds we assume) are more important than learning. And Mohammed told us that almsgiving, charity, takes many forms.

Good reminders. Perfectly good calls to be charitable and generous. But do we need *religion* to tell us to be charitable and generous? Do we need the Talmud or the Bible or the

sayings of Mohammed or the Koran to remind us to try to be decent human beings? If not, what is, after all, the source of goodness?

Chuang-Tzu, writing a long time ago in the tradition we know as Taoism, said:

In the age when life on earth was full no one paid any special attention to worthy men, nor did they single out the man of ability. Rulers were simply the highest branches on the trees and the people were like deer in the woods. They were honest and righteous without realizing that they were “doing their duty.” They loved each other and did not know this was “love of neighbor.” They deceived no one yet did not know they were “men to be trusted.” They were reliable and did not know that this was “good faith.” They lived freely together giving and taking and did not know they were generous. For this reason their deeds have not been narrated. They made no history.

How nice it would be to live in a place and time in which rules and regulations and exhortations were unnecessary because people naturally were honest, kind, and generous.

Of course Chuang-Tzu is not alone in imagining a golden age from which we have fallen or regressed. As we well know, the Bible, for one, begins with such a tale. Yet really (sadly actually) such imagining is after all just an indirect exhortation to be good, isn't it. After all, Chuang-Tzu wouldn't have felt the need to say that once upon a time humans behaved well without having to think much about it... unless he, like us, lived in a time where things were quite otherwise, a time in which rules and regulations and exhortations seem to be quite necessary.

All of which brings us back to the questions: What *is* the source of goodness? *Is* it religion? Or, conversely, in the words of Christopher Hitchens, does religion “poison everything”?

I want to consider that last question for more than a moment, as a way then of coming back around to the first question having to do with the source of goodness. Does religion poison everything? Is religion the cause of more harm than good?

A case can pretty easily be made – and Hitchens does make it in his book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*; other recent books make pretty much the same case... - that religion has created and still creates more problems than it solves, more suffering than it heals, more evil than good. The catalogue is long and sorry: from the simple suppression of reason and scientific exploration by means of every dogmatic assertion of fundamentalist and orthodox religions of every stripe; to the Christian Crusades, persecution of witches, women, scientists, bombing of abortion clinics, abuse of young boys; Muslim holy wars, terrorism in the name of Islam, oppression of women in the name of Islam; extreme violence in good measure based on religious differences between Hindu and Muslim. Even Buddhists have had their bad moments. And on it goes.

So, yes the case can be readily made against religion.

Though this is actually nothing new. The Latin poet and philosopher Lucretius, for example, who lived over two thousand years ago, wrote:

How many evils has religion caused!...
Religion has brought forth criminal and impious deeds.

Returning to our time, Mark Juergensmeyer, in his book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, delves deeply into just one of the ills caused by religion, the connection of religion and violence – whether from a Timothy McVeigh or an Osama bin Laden and all too many others. And he begins by drawing our attention to the paradox at the heart of all this: religion, which most people feel “should provide tranquility and peace, not terror,” instead supplies “not only the ideology but also the motivation and the organizational structure for the perpetrators” of terror and violence. (And, deepening the paradox, even those responsible for religious violence claim that their ultimate goal is... peace...)

And indeed, we find this paradox right at the heart of religious texts themselves. For example, the same book of Psalms which gives us these lines:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
(Psalm 23:1-3)

...also give us these:

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites...
Happy shall they be who pay you back
What you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock.
(Psalm 137:7a, 8b,9)

Likewise in the Koran may be found passages – frequently cited these days – which exhort cooperation and peace among peoples and among different religions, yet also other passages which call for death and destruction to heretics and unbelievers.

Compounding all of this, Juergensmeyer reminds us that religious violence can be particularly dangerous and intractable because those who engage in it believe they are fighting a *cosmic* war of good versus evil. And interestingly often they believe that they are the ones on the defensive, indeed that even before they lift a finger they are already in a state of war begun by... you name it: baby-killing doctors, the secular West... the list is long. And, worse yet, a cosmic war brooks no compromise. As Juergensmeyer puts it, “a satanic enemy cannot be transformed; it can only be destroyed.”

Sadly, tragically, we hear echoes of this as well from those who apparently see the so-called “war on terror” in precisely such absolute terms.

And all this said, returning to the paradox, millions of Jews and Christians and Muslims, probably the vast majority, really do find inspiration and peace in their religions, these same millions decrying the violence and other evils perpetrated in the name of or under the cover of their religions.

So – religion as a source, much less *the* source of goodness?

Quite the contrary many would say. So Christopher Hitchens for one – and he is one of many – thinks we should abolish religion; he calls for a new enlightenment instead. Well, we could surely use a new enlightenment, a renewed faith in and use of reason... but abolishing religion, so woven into the web of human culture, is a tall order, whether or not we find it a good idea. And in any case we would be throwing out plenty of babies with the bathwater.

Not that religion *is* the source of goodness. In fact, *it is no such thing*. But at its best religion can be a *container* for human goodness, a *guide* to goodness, not the only guide, but a guide nevertheless. Through texts and teachings and exemplars within each religious tradition we can be directed toward decent, ethical living, can be called to our better selves. We simply (simply!) need to be free to pick and choose what we take from the religious traditions.

The source of goodness? Well... somewhat mysterious... and debatable. But in any case close at hand.

Perhaps it is just the product of millions of years of evolution, since cooperation and even kindness and generosity are – whatever else they are – survival tools. (Daniel Dennett in his book *Breaking the Spell* and Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* make this sort of point – among others!)

Perhaps something some would call God, working through us or in us.

But in any case goodness and our capacity for what we would call goodness precedes religious institutions and prescriptions. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (more often cited than read) call it the “moral law within.” The rest of us call it the voice of conscience. But as to the source of this “moral law within” – call it evolution, call it God... we don’t really know, and perhaps it really doesn’t matter what we call it.

Salman Rushdie put it this way in an essay several years ago: “...people can be moral without being godly for the simple reason that morality precedes ideology – religion is a way of organizing our ideas about good and evil, and not necessarily the origin of those ideas.”

Here’s an image which makes pretty much the same point:

Imagine you lived in a village far from any source of water. Further imagine that all your water was brought to you by specially designated water-bearers. You might well come to believe that these water-bearers were themselves the source of the water.

But in fact, you yourself *could* travel to the same apparently distant wells from which the water bearers had filled their jugs.

Many religions and just about all religions to some degree leave their adherents in the village. But some religions, and some more than others – Buddhism to a large extent, certainly our Unitarian Universalism – invite anyone who wishes to travel themselves to the wellsprings of inspiration, insight, and goodness.

To travel to the source (which turns out not to be so far away after all!), to travel to the source and seeing for ourselves, reasoning on the basis of what we see, and trying to live accordingly.

Seeing what exactly?

To begin with, simply seeing the nature of our human condition, the fact of human suffering, the fact of life’s brevity, the reality of our interdependence, and concluding (simple reasoning really) that choosing and nurturing a kind and generous spirit is a better, more fulfilling, way to live than in the spirit of selfishness and mean-spiritedness. As Hitchens and others point out – and they are right – we don’t need God or religion to tell us that the Golden Rule (call it the moral law within if you like) is a better way to live than the law of the jungle.

Further, looking *more* deeply (or drawing more deeply from the well) we might find ourselves transformed by a direct *experience* of our interdependence and of the evanescent nature of self and ego. And the world's wisdom traditions – many of them carried by the world's religions – offer us tools of meditation and contemplation to help us do this. (Sam Harris, in his book *The End of Faith*, is articulate about this, even as he also argues for the end of faith-bound or belief-bound religion.) And if we use those tools, travel those wisdom paths, we might find ourselves quite naturally living more kindly and generously – in the spirit Chuang-Tzu imagined.

It is a complex world. (There's news!) There is violence and suffering and hatred that we of course wish would go away. Wishing won't make it so. But we can each contribute to a more peaceful and generous and kind world by returning to the well of goodness that is indeed close at hand – by whatever name we choose to call it – perhaps sometimes with the help of those teachings and exemplars carried forward by the great religious and wisdom traditions of the world. This is certainly what our own Unitarian Universalism encourages us to do. The Sources of our Living Tradition, articulated in our Principles and Purposes, make this clear. We draw from the wells of our own experience, of the world's religions, of the discoveries of science, all tempered by reason and leavened with love.

Mark Juergensmeyer, at the end of his study of religious violence, asserts that a cure for religious violence is *not* to eliminate religion (whether or not we might think that to be a good idea or even remotely possible), but rather to more vigorously lift up the best of the spiritual and moral values of our various religious traditions.

We could express this in spirit of the story I shared earlier this morning: that we all need to practice every day so that we might become maestros of religion – and goodness – so that we can learn the better to play together in the symphony of humanity.

Pie in the sky?

Sure, if we are expecting perfection. But I'm not suggesting that utopia is anywhere or anytime near. When it comes to imagining our shared human future I try to avoid both optimism and pessimism. As you've heard me say before, we simply don't know enough to be either optimistic or pessimistic.

But I *am* suggesting that as individuals and within our shared traditions – we can act as though the symphony of humanity is possible. We actually *can*. Because – whatever your religion, whether you are theist or atheist or agnostic, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu... or whether you claim no religion at all - the source of goodness is not way over there... or way out there... or way up there.

It is as close as our beating human heart.

Benediction

May we go forth in the spirit of love and kindness,
That the goodness of our hearts
Guided by the wisdom of our minds
Becomes the work of our hands.

So may it be.