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Radical Decency Reflection #56
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Religion: Debasement, Inspiration, Lessons Learned

The philosopher Charles Taylor provided this insight that has deeply affected my view of the world: Just because we are continually confronted with debased versions of an idea does not mean that the idea itself is necessarily debased. It may be but, then again, it may not be. As I look back on my personal journey with religion, this concept seems particularly apt: A rich mix of debasement and inspiration. In this Reflection, I offer my experiences with this compelling area of our living, and seek to draw some lessons about how it can be more effectively translated into a force for positive change.

Debasement.

The son of secular parents, a Protestant and a Jew, I grew up indifferently associated with the First Congregational Church of Scarsdale, New York. One clear memory from those years is leaving services with this thought: They told me to love my neighbor. But it's now 11:30 a.m. on Sunday and I won't get another word of guidance until next Sunday at 10 a.m. So what I am supposed to do? Another memory: A "charming" anecdote about the minister who, in response to a prospective member's concern about hypocrites in the congregation, responded by saying, "we can always use another one." No inspiration there for an earnest teenager.

With this tepid introduction, I have, as an adult, strived to maintain openness and curiosity about religion. After all, billions of people across thousands of years have been deeply attached to it. Who am I to dismiss it? However, I have been continually brought up short by the staggeringly debased versions I see all around me.

An obvious example is religion's lethality. When Moses discovered the Hebrews worshipping a golden calf, he had 3,000 of his people massacred (Exodus, 32:29). And their triumphal entry into the holy land was an unprovoked attack on a people whose sin was worshipping gods other than Yahweh. Then there is the last 2,000 years of history, a period riddled with Christian, Islamic, and other religiously motivated crusades, jihads, wars of aggression, and massacres. And the religious carnage continues: Jews and Muslims killing each other in the Middle East; Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir.

This murderous aspect of so many religions is not some weird coincidence. Religious ideas have the power to deeply move people. And one of the prime lessons of history is that entrenched power co-opts movements that might otherwise challenge it. So, it is utterly predictable that the great religious traditions, whatever their original intent, have repeatedly become apologists for those in power. In this co-opted and domesticated state, their prime function – the rationale for their privileged existence – is the "divinely inspired" moral rationale they provide for the ruling classes relentless push for more and more power including their wars, persecutions, and genocides.

This co-opted version of religion is how I remember the Church of my childhood: Holding its expressed values lightly; soft-soaping, with an easy quip, hypocrisy and other deeply consequential moral issues; sending the message, in large ways and small, that wealth and power excuse all but the most aberrant and blatant ethical lapses; offering programs and messages that feel good but make no uncomfortable demands. And, so too, in the Jewish world – my religious community of choice for the last 40 years – where we lavish praise on the biggest donors, quietly overlooking the problematic choices that, in so many instances, allowed their outsized private fortunes to accumulate.

Another area where religion's message is endemically debased is in the intellectual sphere. As Howard Lesnick points out in Listening for God, religious stories are meant to inspire. At their best, they are poetry, touching our hearts in ways that a carefully thought through ethical treatise never can.

But when their intent is misunderstood, the effect on our intellectual clear-headedness is striking and the damage, at both a personal and political level, incalculable: Condemning birth control as our population approaches 7 billion; denying social and, often, political legitimacy to dissenters and nonbelievers; teaching young people that masturbation, sexual fantasies and premarital sex are sinful; provoking murderous attacks on Shi'ite neighbors, abortion doctors, and so many other demonized individuals and groups.

Much of this intellectual confusion results from religion's excessive pre-occupation with speculative thinking, ungrounded in empirical evidence. Miracles happen. We can speak with God or commune with the one-ness of the universe through prayer, meditation, or altered states of consciousness. There is a path to everlasting life.

There is nothing wrong with this sort of thinking. To the contrary, for a self-conscious species, speculation beyond the four walls of our perceptual capacities – by allowing us to more fully explore our potential – plays an invaluable role. But our mainstream religious traditions have extended this sort of thinking far beyond its appropriate boundaries. In this debased form it has, far too often, become a replacement for critical thinking instead of an important complement to it.

The result? Far too many of us slip into a place of conformance with one set of spiritual beliefs or another and, with our ideas continually reinforced by co-believers, wind up believing that we have found “the answer.” Pre-occupied with these speculative questions – and our chosen sect's answers – we fail to adequately focus on life's most important questions: (1) Who are we and what are our capabilities and limitations? (2) What choices can we make that will allow us to live more nourishing lives and contribute to a better world? For compelling evidence of this process at work, one need only look at the dismal state of our efforts to change our habitually indecent ways of living. And religion – discharging its role as apologist for the mainstream culture – plays a key role in this process by ensuring that with our thoughts and emotions are engaged focused elsewhere.

Inspiration.

One the other hand . . .

Religious ritual, as I have experienced it here at home, has always seemed mechanical and uninspired. But, then, my wife and I attended 6 a.m. mass in a one room, cinder block church in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Port au Prince, Haiti. Watching the nuns and lay Catholic workers take communion before they left for their work at a nearby orphanage, the idea of taking in the blood and body of Christ suddenly seemed powerful, real, and inspirational. And I couldn't help noticing that most of our fellow service workers were religious, either Catholics or evangelical Christians.

Several years before that, I was a key attorney in a \$500 million Ponzi scheme that began in the evangelical community and ultimately swallowed up a significant number of secular nonprofit organizations as well. The scheme was fueled by the fuzzy religious thinking I describe earlier. Believing in miracles – that 2 plus 2 could equal 5 if God wills it – many Evangelical groups were particularly susceptible to a “too good to be true” scheme that a promoter, speaking their language, proposed.

But what was remarkable was their response. Two days after the bankruptcy filing, Steve Douglas of Campus Crusade for Christ convened 50 of the community's leaders. Quoting principles taken from scripture, he proposed a cooperative approach. Then, over the next 4 years, a coalition of 800 Evangelical groups did something truly unique in the bankruptcy world. Pouring their time, money and inspirational leadership into the effort, they crafted a plan that was premised, not on everyone grabbing what they could, but on fairness. The “winners” (those who took out more than they put in) voluntarily returned a percentage of their winnings. The losers divided the resulting pool of money equally. And, the smaller endangered nonprofits were able to file for hardship exceptions.

Then, finally, there is my half-sister, Judy, and Delle McCormick. Judy, 10 years my senior, became a nun while I was still in junior high school. I didn't understand the choice. But over the years I have been struck by her clarity of purpose, devotion to service and social justice, and ease and zest in living. Delle is a woman I met on a service trip about 10 years ago. Inspired by her faith, she left a comfortable suburban life to devote herself to social justice work. She too is suffused with clarity of purpose and a passionate sense of mission. By their example, Judy and Delle have deeply affected my outlook and choices. The fact that they were both inspired by their religious beliefs is, I believe, no coincidence.

Lessons Learned

I draw two primary lessons from my journey with religion.

The first is positive. Religion's aspirations are of the highest order: To make sense out of our existence. And, focused on this really big issue, it has produced great wisdom and inspiring role models. Moreover, their language, rituals, and traditions are deeply

interwoven into the history of so many of our communities – and offer enormous comfort and inspiration. If we turn our backs on this legacy we will be immeasurably diminished.

Radical Decency, with its focus on respect, understanding, and empathy guides us away from dismissive judgment and toward a deep and abiding curiosity. As I see it, we are far better served if we view our religious traditions through this lens; gleaning the best, not just from our own tradition but from other traditions as well.

A recent conversation with a Catholic brother illustrates the rewards of this approach. Visiting a disturbed young man at his home in the middle of a workday, the brother was asked how he could take the time out of his busy schedule. His response: My vows – poverty, chastity, and obedience – free me to tend to life’s truly important tasks.

Bringing Radical Decency’s attitude of openness and curiosity to our discussion, what flashed for me was how I, too, could find inspiration and wisdom in his vows. My version of “chastity” – a committed marriage – frees me from an over pre-occupation with sex. And I can infuse the spirit of “poverty” into my life, not by giving my possessions away, but by turning more and more fully away from the (false) belief that my well being depends upon them. Finally, if I am fully “obedient” to my core values – Radical Decency – I will be freed from the selfish and grasping values that dominant our culture and so powerfully distract me from my larger life goals.

The second lesson I draw from my journey with religion is cautionary. Even as they offer inspiration and wisdom, our religious traditions are – with depressing regularity – co-opted by those in power. Sometimes the examples are spectacularly obvious to all but the truest of believers. But far more often they are quite subtle and, for this reason, more insidious and pernicious in their effects. So, even as we embrace the nourishment and guidance religion can offer, we need – always – to be vigilant. We must never temporize on the crucial task of exploring the implications of “this attitude” or “that choice.”

Over the years, I have discussed Radical Decency with a significant number of religiously committed people, from a wide variety of traditions. And as these experiences have accumulated so too has my confidence that the philosophy can provide an important anchor in this vital, critical process. Decency to self, others, and the world, at all times, in every context, and without exception – this approach to living distills, I believe, what is best in our religious traditions.

So, fully committed to Radical Decency’s values, my hope is this: Each of us will embody the best in our chosen religious tradition and, crucially, be a clear voice, within that tradition, for resisting the ever present temptation to compromise these ideals for the sake of money, members, and power. Then (to complete my dream), these like-minded religious people, and their secular sisters and brothers – with a growing recognition of their common purposes – would knit together into a powerful, perhaps even irresistible force for creating better lives and a more humane and decent world.

One can only hope . . . and have faith.