

November 20, 2011 / The Reign of Christ / David L. Edwards

The End of Religion

Matthew 25:31-46

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

A few years ago, Kaye and I received a communication from a young friend, who was beginning to cultivate her own spiritual life. She was shedding what no longer fit and gathering to herself what seemed authentic and true. Institutional religion as she had experienced it no longer had a hold on her. For her, religion continued to label people and control knowledge rather than foster creative and deeper understanding through compassion and love. God had more meaning to her as “the universal and divine energy that dwells in all living things,” rather than a divine being somewhere “up there” inspiring fear and demanding loyalty. I am struck now by how her words echoed the ancient words of the Bhagavad Gita, describing God as “the presence that pervades the universe.” Or Psalm 139, in which the psalmist speaks of God's spirit that is everywhere we can go, in every place, in every experience. Our young friend could not see Jesus as the only way people can know and experience God. What did make sense to her was that our lives sacred, and we are endowed with responsibility for caring for the earth and ourselves. Our spiritual work is to grow more conscious of God and our true selves. What advice did we have for her, she asked?

After a day or two, I responded. I thought she was on the right track, being faithful to her own experience, insight, and the truth of her own life. I understood and shared most of what she was struggling with. I encouraged her to keep moving forward with her spiritual work and discovery.

Such religious questioning should be welcomed and encouraged. It is a sign of spiritual awakening and deepening. There is a widespread questioning and reassessment going on these days about religion. Many Christians are struggling with things they were taught and that churches often continue to perpetuate. They do not see Jesus as the only way to God. They do not experience themselves or others as no-good “original sinners”. They experience the world as neither evil nor neutral, a place we simply pass through on our way to the next life. Rather, they experience the world as the good, amazing, bountiful, and beautiful creation of God, into which our own lives are

woven, and which is now damaged and endangered by our failure to live as we were created to live. There is a growing openness to the truth that other spiritual traditions offer.

Being devoted to one's own tradition does not have to mean fanaticism, narrowness of mind or spirit, or extremism. I grew up in a minister's family, always hanging around the church—as a child in Sunday School, as a teenager in youth groups and singing in choirs, going to church camp in the summer, entering college as a pre-ministerial student, and so forth. Religion, theology, spiritual things always held the greatest interest for me. Yet I found that the deeper I went into my own spiritual tradition, the more open I become to what other spiritual traditions have to offer. The more committed I became to the practice of following Jesus, the more I recognized shared truth at the heart of other spiritual traditions. Instead of making me a religious zealot, my spiritual journey as a Christian has brought me closer to those who are close to the heart of their own religious traditions, and to many who claim no religious tradition or practice at all. I have found that a careful reading of scripture itself shows us that Jesus had no intention of creating another religion. He was pointing to the heart of his own tradition, but also what is at the heart of all spiritual traditions. We find it in the reading today from the Gospel of Matthew, as well as in other places in the gospels. It has to do with the ultimate measure of things, of what matters most. This is the last of Jesus' teachings in Matthew's gospel. We hear it on this, the last Sunday of the Christian liturgical year, which we call Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ. Jesus paints a picture of the final assessment of what truly matters. This text responds to the question, What is it really and truly all about?

"When the Son of Man comes," says Jesus. It is not clear that Jesus identifies himself with this "Son of Man" who acts on God's behalf. I am not sure it really matters. Here is a parable, a word picture of God gathering all the nations, all the peoples of the world, for judgment. No one is exempt. This includes us. The United States and our self-interests and self-importance are not the ultimate measure of things. The rain of God's judgment, just as of God's love, falls on everyone alike. The story of the final judgment covers all nations, all individuals. As we see in the teaching, those who think they have special standing are in for a huge surprise.

On what basis is the judgment made? Here is the shocker. It has nothing to do with what religion you proclaim or what beliefs you hold. It has nothing to do with whether you are spiritually superior to anyone else. It has nothing to do with your view of

the Bible and whether you can quote a single verse. It has nothing to do with how passionately you hold your viewpoints or convictions. It does not even have to do with whether or not you “believe in Jesus Christ”! How about that!

The ultimate measure of life according to Jesus' parable of the final judgment is how we respond to the needs of our fellow human beings—the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the lonely, the left out. It has to do with whether or not we are living as true human beings. The sheep, or the righteous, did these things as a natural course. They are surprised to find out that they were actually serving God or the Son of Man, or the king. They were just doing what they were supposed to do without seeing it as doing something special. The most beautiful act of compassion or generosity is that which is unselfconscious, having no thought of reward or recognition or even awareness of doing good. Elsewhere Jesus taught this as not letting the one hand know what the other is doing (Matt. 6:1-4). Those who inherit God's kingdom are those who were simply living as true human beings the way God made us to live. They did not do it to receive philanthropic awards or get their names in the paper or to receive a thank you note. They did it because that's who they were, because they did not know any other way to live.

The goats are surprised when the king identifies himself with those in need. We did not see you in need, they say. Most likely they were preoccupied with being right or religious or powerful or whatever. These are the ones Jesus spoke of as calling him “Lord, Lord” but not doing God's will (Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 6:46). They divide life up into religious and non-religious, sacred and profane, and are always seeking to separate from ordinary human existence, its realities, challenges, and needs. They love religious “experiences,” but miss the reality that the human and creational life we share IS sacred, and the needs that are part of it.

I think we can say that the righteous, or the sheep, are those who were trying to live as true human beings. The goats, or those described as accursed, are those caught in religion. Here we find Jesus' clearest picture of the difference between religion and the spiritual life, that is, living fully as human beings in our relationship to God and to others.

It seems to me—at least I hope it is so—that today we are seeing a waking up from the dream of “religion” into the bright daylight of our humanity, of living the way God made us to live. Religion's highest purpose is to point and lead us to our true selves, and help us find our right place in the world. Yet religion also has the potential to make us less than human and to become sick and evil. The questioning and struggles of our young friend are something that all of us need to go through in order to move from

religion to spirituality, from formality to life itself, from trying to be religious to being full human beings, from separateness to responsible and caring communion with life.

Jesus was trying to awaken people to their true identities. He never once said, You are original sinners! He said, You are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. He was suspect of religion for religion's sake, and was always in conflict with religious leaders because of that. Jesus held religion in very high regard, but not as an end in itself. Religion was only the raft to get us to the shore of our true humanity. Paul Tillich wrote that Jesus was the "end of religion". This is true in both meanings of the word "end" (*telos*). Jesus was the end of religion in that he revealed the dangers of being stuck in religion and the perpetuation of it. He offended the professional religious types by calling into question all the preoccupation with religious duties and rites and such. Yet Jesus was also the end of religion in the sense that he fulfilled (*telos*) what religion is truly about and pointing us to—our becoming fully human.

Does this mean we give up everything about religion? Not at all. Religion is very important to our identity as human beings. If we get stuck in religion, however, it becomes unhealthy and separates us from life. Yet it can point us in the direction of our full humanity. The bottom line is, however, not what we believe or what tradition we practice or anything else. It is how we respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters in life, and, I think, these days we must include the creation itself.

Something stood out for me this week for the first time. It was the bit about the king telling the righteous, the sheep, that they were to inherit the kingdom that was prepared for them from the foundation of the world. What it said to me was that the kind of life Jesus taught and lived, the life of mercy, compassion, peace, living harmoniously with one another and with the creation...that kind of life is in harmony with the very foundation, structure, and essence of life itself. Greed, violence, self-seeking, hate, all such things cannot ultimately win the day because they are against the very nature and movement of life itself. There are consequences. There is accountability. It is built into the very fabric of life. To live one way is to enjoy the reward of simply being who we are created to be. To live the other is to experience something of what Jesus means by the outer darkness or eternal punishment. It is the suffering of being alienated from our true selves.

Our spiritual practice, the inward journey and outward journey we work with, is not so that we become religious. It is so that our full and true humanity can emerge and flourish, the true persons God created us to be. Our inward journey work is to help us

see our pretenses and let them go, to see where we are separating ourselves from others and drop the walls of judgment or hostility or fear, or whatever has grown up in our hearts, distancing us from others. The inward journey work is to become aware of and affirm our own lives, our strengths and weaknesses, our health and our unhealthiness, our wholeness and our wounds. Then we discern what we are called and gifted to do in the service of life. That is the outward journey, which is to love this world with God's own love. May our spiritual practice continue to move us in that direction as we follow Jesus in whom we find our true humanity.