

The 3rd Rail of Religion

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, January 21, 2007
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I said in the announcement for my talk this morning that traditional religions glide along on rails polished to a mirror finish by custom and use. But what powers them? Is it the same thing that energizes this new religion of ours, Ethical Culture? Whether dedicated to a supreme being or a supreme way of being, do all religions share a common energy?

New Yorkers are well acquainted with the force and the danger of the third rail that powers our daily commute. There's an analogy to be drawn that no matter what the railway, if it's electrified there's a third rail—be it beside or above the train. And if the power's the same is the source of the power also the same?

I hate to torture the “third rail” metaphor any more than I have already, but I'm going to. There's a lot going on in the metaphor-of-the-train; third rail delivering power from beside or above; that energy derived from different sources, some clean, modern and efficient, others old, outmoded and polluting. Whew.

Can you believe we're three weeks into 2007 already? This New Year is proving one of ironies. Weeks after I'd selected *The 3rd Rail of Religion* as the title of my talk this morning, a young man had a seizure and fell on the tracks of the New York City subway dangerously close to the 3rd rail and in the path of an oncoming train. A stranger left his two young daughters on the platform, leapt down onto the tracks, and pressed the man down as most of the train passed over them before coming to a halt. They escaped with only bruises.

You may forget what you hear this morning, but those on that platform will never forget what they saw. Acts of heroism like that are seldom called for, and even more rarely is that call answered. Those present witnessed a moment normally associated with the battlefield.

And, unfortunately, there are an increasing number of battlefields in our world today. More unfortunate is that our nation is active on an increasing number of them. And most tragic is that an increasing number of people are losing their lives on and near them.

This brings me to another irony. Just two days ago, Friday, a proclamation was issued by the president of the United States declaring today, January 21, 2007, as *National Sanctity of Life Day*.

That requires no further comment, it speaks for itself.

Ideology, a broad and scholarly word, has come into more general usage of late, and that's not an entirely good thing as that more general usage is accompanied by a shift in emphasis. Long used in a context that included both the sacred and the secular, ideology has assumed a decidedly religious tenor of late. No longer does it refer primarily to a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, a group, a class, or a culture, but it has come to connote a set of sectarian doctrines or beliefs.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

Here's an example of that shift. In 2001 when President George W. Bush declared war on terrorism, politicians worldwide clamored to assure us that it was not a religious conflict. Less than a week after 9-11 President Bush himself went to the Islamic Center in Washington to reinforce the point that it was the work of murderous adherents to a mutation, emphasis on *mutation*, of Islam and not representative of Islam itself.

Here's what he had to say five years later in an address to the nation from the White House on September 11, 2006. "Since the horror of 9-11, we've learned a great deal about the enemy. We have learned that they are evil and kill without mercy but not without purpose." I'm not making a comparison here, only an illustration. Bush went on to say, "We have learned that they form a global network of extremists who are driven by a perverted vision of Islam—a totalitarian ideology that hates freedom, rejects tolerance, and despises all dissent." Again, just an illustration that "ideology" has come to equate to "religion" in our society. He concluded, "The war against this enemy is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century, and the calling of our generation."

That's religious language and religious reference, no matter how much dissembling may surround it. "...the decisive ideological struggle...the calling of our generation." Remind you of a crusade?

What happened in five years? What transformed the war on terrorism into a battle of ideologies, a struggle between the Muslim world and the West? This is a battle that world opinion is coming to consider an attempt by one ideology to annihilate another, and the ideologies involved are not necessarily secular but considered by a growing number to be decidedly religious.

What in the world is going on here? Or should I ask, What's going on in the world? Religion is a serious matter. Events of this new century of ours have shown just how hazardous it can be. Religion has a blood drenched history replete with otherwise unimaginable pain, suffering, and inhumanity committed in its name. With theocratic nations on the rise, and theocratic propensities on the rise in democratic nations—including our own—there is virtually no action beyond religious justification.

Let's get back to the question at hand and the third rail of religion. I got sidetracked there—I warned you I was going to torture the metaphor-of-the-train! But the sidetrack had a purpose: To illustrate the importance of the question and the importance of understanding religion in a social context. It's more than an academic endeavor, but one that can lead to cultural insight and perhaps some better answers to the world's troubles and conflicts.

I believe religions are all powered by the same thing. I'm using the word religion loosely, but not so loosely as to include those movements disguised as religions but nothing more than attempts at authoritarianism, self-aggrandizement, and self-enrichment. With those exceptions, I believe that religions are powered, in one way or another, by a desire to do better and to be better.

Some seek to make individuals better so that they have a better chance of a better life after this life—of eternal life, of eternal salvation. Others seek to make individuals good because good individuals make this world better.

This is the juncture where the religion of my birth and I parted company, and I've been on that sidetrack ever since. Mine wasn't a frontier upbringing, but it was Midwestern. Kindergarten was kindergarten, not pre-school. Crayons and games, naps—

more for the teachers, I think, than for the children—and learning to socialize with others. Moral education didn't begin until the first grade where religious instruction was mixed in with other teachings in both parochial and public schools. That's a formula some would have us return to today.

Mine was a Roman Catholic school so I was taught by women and men in black garb accented by white trim who had dedicated their lives to their religious beliefs. They told me, pretty much from the first day of school, that if I was good I would go to heaven. That jibed with what my parents and older sister were already telling me so it resonated. That's a pretty powerful incentive to be good. Especially as they told me that if I wasn't good I would go to hell. And that's a pretty powerful way to exert control over willful little boys and little girls.

I was six years old. It hadn't yet occurred to me to question the teachings of authority figures, or to doubt heaven and hell, so the good-equals-heaven slash bad-equals-hell equation made sense. Nice, balanced, even reasonable. The logic held up as long as the premise hold up.

But then they went beyond good and bad behavior and got into good and bad belief, good and bad thought. That may have come after the Christmas break. We didn't have semesters, we didn't even have different rooms or different teachers for different subjects—one room, one teacher, all day, every day. Argggg! Anyway, it was later in that first year that we were told that if we didn't believe the right thing, didn't think the right way, we were evil and would go to hell.

Maybe they over-taught the deed part because when they got to the creed part they lost me. That didn't hold up to the earlier equation and I sensed that this "higher math" wasn't for me. I asked myself, and quickly found myself asking them, if good equals heaven what does all the rest of this have to do with it? If it's actions that get us through the pearly gates, why the emphasis on thought, why the requirement of belief? I didn't get a satisfying answer, so off on the spur of Ethical Humanism I went and I've been traveling that track since.

Anyone here have a similar experience, either with authority figures or with your own thinking? There are a lot of us in this movement who buy into the power of religion—the belief, the aim, the ideal of betterment—but not the source of that power.

For those of you who have trouble with the concept of, or even the word, religion let's broaden the scope a bit. I don't want to go too deeply into the boundaries of religion, but there's certainly more to religion than a worldview or a philosophic perspective.

Everybody needs a philosophy and everybody has one, no matter how rudimentary it may be. And everyone needs an understanding, no matter how unsupported, of how the world works. So everyone has a philosophy and everyone has a worldview and often they're drawn from an organized religion—the key word being *organized*. There is an institutional element, no matter how minimal or how fragmented, to religion.

And, no, I'm not going to paraphrase Will Rogers by saying I don't belong to any organized religion, I'm an Ethical Culturist. So you didn't hear that here!

Generally understood, religions provide four things; identity, hope, meaning, and community. Adopting a certain religious stance can provide identity. You don't have to belong to a thing to claim the identity of Christian or Buddhist or Ethical Humanist. Likewise, adhering to tenets can provide meaning and hope, answers to life's larger

questions, even the promise of a better life here or in the hereafter. Again, no membership required.

And then we come to community. It's pretty difficult to provide community without people coming together and that takes at least a minimal infrastructure, a modicum of institution, even if it's an e-list that brings people together at a specified time and place—real or cyber. House churches—those that literally meet in peoples living rooms or dens—have an institutional element. Meet-ups that meet in restaurants or bars have an institutional element. Chat rooms have an institutional element. That doesn't make all such gatherings religions, but it does mean that to be considered a religion you need to provide community.

So I'm being very broad and inclusive in considering religion this morning. More broad and more inclusive than I would be in other contexts, but it serves the purpose for a distinction I want to make. While all religions are powered by the same thing—a desire for betterment—not all turn to the same source for that power.

Serious students of religion often divide it into two categories, *mythos* and *logos*. As those designations imply, mythos religions are based on myths, meaningful stories that offer explanations of the world and are intended to impart meaning to life. And logos implies rational religion. Though rooted in Greek philosophy, logos religion today is usually associated with a scientific-empirical worldview.

There are many, less scholarly ways of expressing that—faith-based and reason-based, natural and supernatural—but all these expressions recognize that mythological religions and rational religions draw their energy from different sources.

This fits nicely our beleaguered but resilient metaphor-of-the-train. The myths upon which the most pervasive religions of today are based are held to have been handed down from above, usually by means of divine revelations to ancient or modern prophets who passed them along to those in need of them. That wasn't always the case, and there are exceptions, but it's been pretty much true since humans began recording them. Once written on parchment they became etched in stone.

Prior to that, myths were passed along verbally from one generation to the next. We all played games in school that shows how reliable that is! But it had an advantage. There was a time when every act of animal and nature was attributed to a spirit, a god. As humans began to understand the world in which they live, those gods began to dissipate.

Once we could kindle and harness fire, we no longer needed a mythological explanation for it and those gods disappeared from our lore. The same holds true for agricultural and animal husbandry. But once we etched mythological belief in stone and into our cultural psyche, things became problematic. Old ideas became harder and harder to leave behind, to let go of.

Then along came logos and with it a new source for religious energy, reason. Religions dedicated to conserving an ossified past are wary of knowledge at odds with their mythologies. These new, liberal religions welcome the discoveries of science with open arms. In the metaphor-of-the-train, we now have two sources of religious energy, one delivered from above and one from beside.

Trains get you from point-A to point-B. Like other industries, the railway industry has turned to increasingly efficient and clean sources of energy—going from coal to diesel fuel to electricity, the generation of which has followed the same path of streamlining. So has religion. When the indiscriminate use of fossil fuels becomes too

pervasive, they began to pollute the atmosphere. So, too, the indiscriminate use of fossilized religion.

When the leaders of those religions begin to preach that theirs is not a way but the way, dissipation of meaning and distortion of purpose are not far off. When it is no longer claimed that the purpose of life can be attained through good deeds; when it is preached that we are inherently bad, even evil beings and that our attempts at betterment are not only futile but themselves evil manifest in arrogance; when it is said that betterment cannot be attained in this world but only in another, and that the only way to attain that other world is through believe in their teachings, through adherence to their ways, in obedience to their authority—at that point they begin to pollute our culture. At that point they have become, what the founder of our movement, Felix Adler, called decadent theologies.

In summation and a conclusion:

Religions from across the spectrum are powered by the same thing, the desire, the aim to do and to be better.

That power can be derived from above life or parallel to life, its source being mythical or logical, natural or supernatural.

While I believe the universal power of religion is betterment, the source of that power and how it's delivered shapes not only what we become but what we are willing to accept. Religion is indeed serious business—deadly serious. Its third rail can move you forward or it can fry you.

I believe that when the source of religious power is external—when it's delivered from above from a supernatural source—that conflict over the nature and superiority of that source is inevitable. I believe that we have fought enough wars over whose god is bigger. Too many have died over improbable assertion and unprovable claims. There has been too much loss over too much folly.

Addressing these issues can itself be dangerous. Any ideology, be it religious or secular in nature, that is widely and strongly held is a powerful cultural force. Power can be loud or can be whispering, and it's often exercised differently in private than in public. It is an abuse of power to speak behind the back of those who would challenge it, and cowardly to manipulate the un- or ill-informed. It's even worse to be the source of that misinformation.

It is difficult to challenge that force. It takes courage to speak truth to power. Challenge and truth provoke power and cause it to lash out in retribution. And when power speaks, especially when power speaks forcefully, it is taken as truth whether it is or not. Thus the errant opinions of the powerful are perpetuated, and flaws are woven into the fabric of fact.

In getting at sources, I do not mean to be disrespectful of traditional religions or their adherents. In citing their bloody history I am also well aware of the contributions they have made, the difference they have affected, and the meaning they continue to impart to the lives of many. But you can not call one new without labeling others old, or some modern without saying others are outdated, or liberal and conservative without addressing what is being liberated and what is being conserved.

I do have differences with the leaders of those old, outdated, conservative religions, some of whom I know from personal experience no longer believe what they preach, just

as many of their followers no longer believe what they hear but are at a loss as to what to do or where to go.

That is where we and other new, modern, liberal religions have so much to offer.

We Ethical Culturists bind together in community not in adoration of a supreme being but in search of a supreme way of being. Our ideal is in perfected living. In the formative years of the Ethical Culture movement, Felix Adler said, “Perfection does not reveal itself to us as existent in the beginning; but as something that ought to be, something new which we are to help create. Somehow the secret of the universe is in our breast. Somehow the destinies of the universe depend upon our exertions.”

Now lest you feel crushed by the burdening responsibility for the future of the universe, our aim is not perfection itself but the successive approximation of it. Whatever steps toward it we can make we are duty bound to take. And that is the source of what powers our search for, our belief in, and our efforts toward betterment.

Ethical Culture is an organic religion and aims to cultivate that which is within us; an ineffable sense of wonder that we exist at all, and an indefatigable faith in the significance of our existence, in life, and in the worth and dignity we ascribe to each other.

As Ethical Humanists, we exult at simply being alive in and being a part of this incomprehensibly vast and expanding universe. We find life itself breathtakingly beautiful and find satisfaction, meaning, and purpose in contributing to human betterment. The power behind Ethical Culture is our belief in betterment through our own efforts. The source of that power is a respect for the worth and dignity of others and a sense of deep connection with all that is. That is not handed down to us from above but created among us as we go through life side by side, hand in hand, heart in heart.



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