

# *What Passes For Religion*

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*What Passes For Religion?* I am of course going to approach that question from an Ethical Culture perspective in the understanding that ours is not the only perspective. There are other authentic positions but this is, after all, the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

Actually, the title question this morning is not mine. It was first posed for us by the founder of our movement, Felix Adler, in the late nineteenth century. Adler, wrote, “There is a time to act for religion by protesting against what passes for religion.”

In *Outlook*, our newsletter, I asked if there are imposters masquerading in the guise of religion that we should be protesting. Undoubtedly there are and undoubtedly we will, but not this morning. I would like to approach the question directly in a positive way, ferreting out the religiously authentic rather than focusing on the fraudulent.

All religions have their special days, whether they’re called holy days, high holy days, or holy days of obligation. Some of these fall on the same day every year and some are movable feasts. The boundary of what passes for religion is a movable feast. It shifts with each consideration and from era to era.

There’s a lot out there that doesn’t pass for religion, and a lot in here that does.

How many here consider themselves Ethical Culturists or Ethical Humanists?

How many claim Ethical Culture as their religion?

Approximately but not exactly the same number, a few hands went down.

Which goes to prove two points: We wouldn’t be Humanists if we agreed on everything—it’s said that you can ask any two of us a question and get three answers—and we clearly come here this morning with different conceptions of what passes for religion.

In questioning what passes for religion, Adler went on to say, “There is a time to prepare the way for a larger morality by shattering the narrow forms of dogma whereby the progress of morality is hindered.”

He was clear that what others considered religion, what had until that time been considered religion, did not pass for religion with him. He held that the moral element was what gives value and dignity to a religion. He said that, “Ethical religion can be real only to those who are engaged in ceaseless effort at moral improvement.” ...*ceaseless effort at moral improvement*. Only those, who labor ceaselessly at moral improvement can claim Ethical Culture as their own.

By your own judgment, how many meet that “ceaseless” standard?

Not quite as many as those who just self-identified as Ethical Culturists. In fact, not nearly as many. Actually, none. Adler set high standards for himself and for us, both for

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

what he thought passes for religion and what he thought necessary to claim it as one's own.

My guess is that hands would continue to go up and down if I were to go on and on. But the raising and lowering of hands will henceforth be metaphorical as the quiz is over. Whether my going on-and-on is likewise metaphorical—well, you can be the judge of that in a while.

For those of you who have been fretting through warm, snowless months lamenting the lack of a “real” winter, I hope you're satisfied. Today's forecast of temperatures in the 30s is a veritable heat wave, but it's still cold out there!

But it's warm in here in more ways than one. Our most ancient of human ancestors gathered to sit around a fire, sharing its warmth and pondering the mysteries of life and the universe. This morning we come together in much the same way as we gather, snug from the elements in this grand hall, to enjoy the warmth of each other and to ponder the mysteries of life and the universe.

The mysteries we ponder today are different as we know so much more of life and the universe. But mystery resides not in what we know but in what we don't know, and we approach that in much the same way as did our ancestors—with reason, with resolve, with courage, and in community.

It has been my experience that when people pause to ponder what passes for religion, they often change their mind on some central and cherished convictions that have comforted and guided them through life. My great-great Uncle Franz Pestch—our family's skeptic-in-chief until I came along—was fond of saying, “To think is to doubt.” And doubt often leads to surprising change.

It can be jarring to suddenly realize that you are an Ethical Humanist, a philosophic naturalist. You can feel like you've lost something, like you've been robbed.

In case anyone here this morning should have such an experience, let me issue a disclaimer: Neither I nor the New York Society for Ethical Culture is responsible for lost or stolen beliefs.

I want to continue with some formative thoughts from Adler before getting into my own. Adler was not an elitist by the standards of his time, but he did hold that there was an intellectual rather than an obeisant element to religion. In beginning his inquiry into what passes for religion, he asked and answered, “What is the way to get a religion? We know, at all events, what cannot be the way. It cannot be to prostrate out intellects before the throne of authority...to abjure our reason.”

He went on to say that, “Whatever religion we adopt must be consistent with the truth with which we have been enriched at the hands of science.”

Well, that certainly put him at odds with the dominant religions of his day, and it keeps us at odds with manifestations of those same religions. But he went further. In holding that “religion is, primarily, a matter of experience,” he made clear his contention that “One cannot attain religion merely by trying, in his closet, to think out the problems of the universe.”

Adler held that the point of departure of what passes for religion is the point of departure of what passes for reason. He said, “Religion has been so eager to supply us with information concerning the universe outside of us, its origins and its destiny,

because our life is linked with that of the universe, and our destiny is dependent on the destiny of the universe.”

Today we might say, “Well, duh.” But that was pretty revolutionary thinking in the nineteenth century as he divorced humanity from supernatural notions and placed us firmly within nature. He held that “Of the origin of things we know nothing, and can know nothing.” and was critical of the religion he set out to reform, to reconstruct, to make authentic. “She faces a sky” he said, “blood-red with sunset colours that deepen into darkness, and prophesies dawn. She faces death, and prophesies life.” Two prophesies, one simplistic and one fanciful. Clearly the one did not capture a progressive’ attention, and the magical thinking of the other did not pass for religion for Adler.

But what did, and what does? What was and what is religiously authentic? What passes for religion?

For those for you who gag on the very word “religion,” let me draw a distinction between the noun religion and adjective religious.

The pragmatist, John Dewey, asserted that, “Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end...because of its general and enduring value is religious in quality.” Dewey and Adler knew each other and did not see eye-to-eye on everything, but it this they did agree. In maintaining religion is essentially experiential, they recognized that all experience—aesthetic, political, moral, scientific, social—is potentially religious.

So while one can be religious without affiliation, there is an institutional quality to religion. We can look at the body of thought that comprises Ethical Culture and say that it is religious, or at the very least urges us toward the religious. In coming together here this morning, in gathering as we go because of our commonly held values and shared aspirations, we make of the religious a religion.

But that distinction aside, where you stand on this controversial issue is a matter of perspective. And when it comes to perspective, I turn to Judge Noah S. "Soggy" Sweat, Jr. In 1952, he delivered a speech—just a couple of paragraphs, really—on the floor of the Mississippi state legislature of which he was a member. It’s come to be known as *The Whiskey Speech*. Given that title, and given that time, and given that sobriquet, *Soggy*, and given the mellifluous style in which it was undoubtedly delivered—well, you get the picture.

But despite that picture, Soggy was insightful and informative. I don’t have the advantage of his accent or idiom, but here’s what Soggy had to say.

My friends,

I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time. However, I want you to know that I do not shun controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it might be. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. All right, here is how I feel about whiskey.

If you mean whiskey, the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean that evil drink that topples Christian men and women from the pinnacles of righteous and gracious living into the bottomless pits of degradation, shame, despair,

helplessness, and hopelessness, then, my friend, I am opposed to it with every fiber of my being.

However, if by whiskey you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the elixir of life, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer, the stimulating sip that puts a little spring in the step of an elderly gentleman on a frosty morning; if you mean that drink that enables man to magnify his joy, and to forget life's great tragedies and heartbreaks and sorrow; if you mean that drink the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars each year, that provides tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitifully aged and infirm, to build the finest highways, hospitals, universities, and community colleges in this nation, then my friend, I am absolutely, unequivocally in favor of it.

This is my position, and as always, I refuse to be compromised on matters of principle.

That's pretty much the way I feel about religion. And I don't think I have to bother paraphrasing Soggy to get my point across.

No one has a franchise on fact or truth, or on compassion or love, on the authentically religious, or on religion itself. All of these—facts, truth, compassion, love—factor in, and we gather here each week in recognition of that.

However you conceive of it, fact and feeling figure high in religion. It has been said that all religion begins with a lump in the throat, and we strive to keep Ethical Humanism consistent with scientific findings. But if we go back far enough in time, we see something that I believe plays all too large a role in religion today. Fear, fear of the unknown.

There was a time, not all that long ago in the course of things, when humans knew very little of the universe, the world, or the environment of which we are all a part. We existed at the very bottom of the hierarchy of human concerns, survival—survival in an indifferent, inhospitable, downright hostile world populated with all manner of threats and dangers real and imagined.

Days were frightening, filled with long-term considerations of sustenance, the more immediate concerns of warmth and shelter as shield against the elements, and immediate dangers from beasts both large and small.

Nights were terrifying, overflowing with these same anxieties magnified by memory and imagination. Every movement in the dark a hint of peril, every sound before dawn a threat, every stillness, every silence, an omen. Starless nights were fraught with a sense of abandonment.

But human ingenuity erected protections against these lurking demons. Every thing, every rock, every tree, every stream, plain and mountain, had its god, its own spirit, that could offer protection—if mollified, if acceded to.

And there you have religion in its primitive form. When we are afraid, when we are in want, when we reach the limits of our understandings and reason fails us, we reach out. And if we find nothing there, we create something.

I do not fault those who first conjured up protection against their fears. Reading ancient and not so ancient mythologies and considering them in the context of their era and the human understandings of their time, they are authentic reactions to human needs

Nor were these fabricators of the supernatural faulted by the religious reformers and reconstructionists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Quite the contrary. They studied them, examined them, picked through and over them as do the gleaners who follow the reapers through fields of plenty.

Adler said of his founding motivations, “There was manifest a desire to separate the grain from the chaff, but also to preserve the grain, and not only to preserve but to plant it anew in the expectation of reaping a richer harvest.”

That continual examination and adjustment, bringing religious thought and ways into concert with expanding understandings and advancements both social and scientific, is noble religious endeavor. In aspiring to noble ends, we our selves take on some of the greatness of that which we admire and that to which we aspire.

When it comes to what passes for religion, we have rejected some of what we inherited. Under scrutiny, the theological basis for morality evaporates. That parting has not been easy. The traditional has dissipated with trauma for some, with sadness for others, and, hopefully, with respect and reverence from all of us. But, since the incorporation of science and reasoned thinking into religion, we have, in the main, not so much rejected as adjusted. The project now is one of continually rearranging the conceptual boundaries of what passes for religion.

I have no doubt that more traumatic upheavals lie ahead for the religious enterprise. For those who have yet to accept the advancements we embrace those upheavals persist today. And when those persistencies intrude on the freedoms and progress of others, when governments are utilized to impose religious laws, we should and must protest. Vigorously.

But our main enterprise remains the enhancement of human dignity through the development of moral values. What quickens the religious impulse and strengthens religion itself is for each of us to think, to doubt, to examine the ideas of others, and to remain ever vigilant as to our own assumptions. To lovingly and respectfully articulate our reverence for life to others, and, in fealty to our convictions, to caringly and patiently listen to those who approach life from a different perspective.

The authentically religious tends to focus on instrumental rather than ultimate values. Rather than categorical statements of good and conversely evil, instrumental values are about means. They directly inform our daily actions and guide the way we are with each other. They concern themselves with achieving desired ends, with successively approximating ideals.

Ultimate values purport to be “for-now-and-forever,” set in stone. But they too are, ultimately, instrumental and do, ultimately, adjust to human want, to human need, to human knowledge and advancement. Truth is never absolute. In fact, it never is but is always becoming. Truth is transient, it expands as our capacity to understand ourselves and the universe expands.

The pursuit of an enduring ideal—one of perfected living in our case—differs in many ways from the assertion of absolute truth.

At root, the one is aspirational, striving through our own efforts to move forward toward a perfect ideal. While the other is worshipful, one of a subjugation to and a kneeling before a supreme being, and is aspirational only in its desire to spend eternity in the presence of that being.

Another reason I hold the aspirational to be authentic is its inherent resistance to authoritarianism. I know more than a few of us in the Humanist spectrum carry that resistance to extremes. Probably about the same percentage as that of the worshipful who lose sight of the object of their adoration and mortgage their will to the authorities who claim to represent it.

Often times the lamentable is the laudable gone awry. Just as it's understandable how those worshipful of the mysterious bow to those who claim knowledge and representation of it, so too is it understandable that those who accept our capability to improve, to expand, to grow, reject any imposition on an unfettered freedom to do so. Just as the worshipful are prone to losing their individuality, their uniqueness to authority, the aspirational are in danger of losing their sense of community, their sense of togetherness, of interconnectedness in vehemently rejecting authority of any sort.

It's one thing to be anti-authoritarian. It's quite another to reject authority all together. That can leave us alone, isolated from society as "non-joiners." This balance between the individual self and the social self is tricky business, especially when it comes to law.

Some religions regard their laws as an attempt to impart reason and dignity to life. That doesn't pass as it's a distortion of reason and a perversion of dignity. Laws can be as unreasonable as those enacting them—and make no mistake about it, religious laws are a human product.

Dignity is attained through justice, not law. Law is one-size-fits-all, the what's-good-for-all-is-good-for-each approach. Dignity resides in our uniqueness.

Placed in the context of religion, law becomes the ridged imposition of the questionable and outdated wisdom of ancients and elders. It does not consider each and ignores era. Further, there is no pride, no dignity to be found in the necessity to enforce laws. Law maintains order, but not peace and it does not recognize or provide dignity.

Justice and dignity, let alone compassion and mercy, are becoming rare commodities in the realm of religion. Even in those founded on those very things—compassion and mercy.

And while I rail against law as the basis for morality, I do not reject all law. I stop at stop signs, and trust that others will as well. The acceptance of collective agreements—whether through democratic rule or community participation—is different from the imposition of assumed authority. That's a subject for another time but I think you can see that the one is authentic and the other is not.

Our concern for ethical living, for the conduct of life, trumps religious law. Most religious law is embodied in scripture, the authoritative writings of religions. I'm fond of what Mark Twain had to say about scripture. "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand."

It is not reasonable to ask people to accept that which offends common sense, that which they cannot accept intellectually. Reason of that sort is reason that has descended into rationalism.

The authentically religious do not ask you to suspend reason, to suspend doubt, to suspend thought. To doubt, to think, to reason are religious in nature. Religious ideas are subject to the same scrutiny as other ideas.

The authentically religious does not strive to separate “the” truth from all else that may be held true, but rather to find that which is real, and to separate the rational from the rationalized. The authentically religious does not delve into creeds of good and evil or apply those characteristics to people, cultures, or other religions, but rather it separates right deeds from wrong deeds and labors toward an ever increasing knowledge, practice, and love of the right.

I do not hold that Ethical Culture is “the” authentic religion, or that Ethical Humanists are the only authentically religious people. There are many more and still others are becoming more so all the time. While the religiously authentic are in the minority—perhaps always were, perhaps always will be—it is a minority of a vast and expanding number of likeminded people of goodwill dedicated to the ideal of perfected living in a better world.

By the standards laid out by liberal thinkers for centuries, standards confirmed in the founding of the Ethical Humanist movement and that continue to be refined today, the moral element reigns supreme in what passes for religion.

What passes for religion must be rational. It cannot ask that we check reason at the door but rather should in all instances challenge us to expand, to develop. For if we do not ourselves develop, what hope have we for a better, a developed future?

What passes for religion must be pragmatic. Rote teachings of submission do not inform or enhance how we behave toward each other. If we are to have a peaceful, loving world, we must find better, more cooperative ways of being together.

What passes for religion must be courageous. The unknown need not be feared. For the authentically religious, the unknown, the mysterious is filled with awe and wonder; it draws us and challenges us, motivating us to greater understandings.

What passes for religion must be dedicated to enduring ideals. The idols of revelation crumble under the pressure of discovery. They endure only so long as their explanations for natural circumstances endure.

The ideals for which many of these idols stood still stand. The ideal of perfected living has resided on the frontier of aspiration since the dawn of humanity, where it has served as a beacon of Justice, Liberty, and Equality for all the children of the earth.

What passes for religion is not the exclusive domain of the children of a transient god, it is equally available to the children of the Enlightenment. The religiously authentic does not ascribe varying degrees of worth, nor question the validity of existence itself. The religiously authentic does not ask if life is worth living.

The religiously authentic examines our capacity to live in concert with each other and in harmony with the rest of nature.

It weighs if, in this context, we are wanting or if we are worthy.

If found wanting, it teaches that it is always within our power to become worthy.

And if found worthy, it requires that we reach out to those who are wanting—to elicit the best in them and in ourselves.

That passes for religion.

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