

**CRISIS OF FAITH
3-14-10
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HISTORICALLY THE PURPOSE OF RELIGION IN ALL CULTURES, WORLD WIDE, HAS BEEN TO ANSWER THE BIG QUESTIONS OF LIFE – WHY WAS I BORN, WHY AM I HERE AND WHERE WILL I GO WHEN I DIE? WELL, ACCORDING TO STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES, MOST AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT WE ALL GO SOMEWHERE WHEN WE DIE – AND MOST THINK WE GO SOMEPLACE THAT IS RATHER LOOSELY DEFINED AS HEAVEN. SOME LAXITY IN THE DEFINITION LINKS TO A TRADITIONAL WILLINGNESS TO ANTICIPATE HEAVEN FOR ONESELF AT A SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER RATE THAN FOR OTHERS OUTSIDE THEIR IMMEDIATE FAMILY. WELL, NOT ANY MORE. HEAVEN, ACCORDING TO THE PEW FORUM OF RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE INFORMED US THAT 70% OF AMERICANS THINK OTHER PEOPLE’S RELIGIONS COULD INDEED RESULT IN ETERNAL LIFE. THERE WAS A PREDICTABLE SQUAWK FROM THE PREDICTABLE SQUAWKERS – INDICATING PEOPLE MUST NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE QUESTION. SO PEW ASKED AGAIN AND CAME UP WITH 65% AFFIRMING THEY MEANT WHAT THEY SAID. SO THIS TIME PEW ASKED, WHICH RELIGIONS? THE ANSWER – IN ESSENCE – WAS ALL OF THEM. MORE THAN HALF THE RESPONDENTS THINK CATHOLICS, JEWS, PROTESTANTS, MUSLIMS AND HINDUS WILL ALL GO TO HEAVEN. MORE THAN HALF THE RESPONDENTS AS REPORTED BY CHARLES BLOW OF THE NEW YORK TIMES, EVEN AGREED “PEOPLE WITH NO RELIGIOUS FAITH” WOULD GET ETERNAL LIFE. ALMOST HALF SAID ATHEISTS WOULD GO TO HEAVEN, “PRESUMABLY KICKING AND SCREAMING” AS BLOW COMMENTED. AMONG THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS – EVEN THE EVANGELICALS AGREED THAT CATHOLICS AND JEWS WOULD GET TO HEAVEN AND HALF OF THE CATHOLICS PLAN TO SHARE A CLOUD WITH THE ATHEISTS. IT WAS GROUCHO MARX WHO FAMOUSLY QUIPPED HE WOULDN’T CARE TO BELONG TO ANY CLUB THAT WOULD HAVE SOMEONE LIKE HIM AS A MEMBER. A NOTED THEOLOGY PROFESSOR WAS QUOTED AS SAYING THAT THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF CHURCHGOERS ARE PELAGIUS, ALTHOUGH FEW HAVE EVER HEARD THE TERM. PEOPLE WILL RECITE TRADITIONAL CREEDS AND AFFIRM HISTORIC CONFESSIONS, BUT WHAT THEY ACTUALLY BELIEVE IN IS SALVATION BY BEING A GOOD PERSON AND DOING YOUR

BEST – WHICH IS BEING A PELAGIUS. I THINK THAT THIS REPORT CERTAINLY AFFIRMS THE GROWING PLURALISM OF THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. WE ARE MORE AND MORE USED TO GETTING ALONG WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT LIKE US, EVEN IF WE DON'T VISIT THEM IN THEIR HOMES OR BELONG TO THE SAME CHURCH, SYNAGOGUE OR MOSQUE. SINCE THE 1890'S IN THIS COUNTRY WE HAVE MOVED AWAY FROM SECTARIANISM AND OUTRIGHT BIGOTRY AND MORE TOWARD TOLERANCE AND EVEN INSTITUTIONALIZED CELEBRATION OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY. EVERYBODY IS IRISH ON ST. PATRICK'S DAY. CINCO DE MAYO, KWANZAA, ROSH HASHANAH, AND EVEN RAMADAN NOW APPEAR ON MASS-MARKET CALENDARS. BUT WE STILL HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO IN FULLY UNDERSTANDING ONE ANOTHER'S RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS. AND AS OUR COUNTRY AND OUR WORLD BECOME SMALLER AND SMALLER, IT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER THAT WE ALL BECOME MORE AWARE OF OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS. WHICH IS ONE OF THE REASONS THAT I FOUND A RECENT ARTICLE IN NEWSWEEK SO ASTOUNDING. LISA MILLER WRITES "IT DOESN'T TAKE A DEGREE FROM HARVARD TO SEE THAT IN TODAY'S WORLD, A PERSON NEEDS TO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT RELIGION. THE CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE ISRAELIS AND THE PALESTINIANS; BETWEEN CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS AND ANIMISTS IN AFRICA; BETWEEN RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES AND PROGRESSIVES AT HOME OVER ABORTION AND GAY MARRIAGE – ALL THESE RELATE, IF INDIRECTLY, TO WHAT RIVAL GROUPS BELIEVE ABOUT GOD AND SCRIPTURE. ANY RESOLUTION OF THESE CONFLICTS WILL HAVE TO COME FROM PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND HOW RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE INFLUENCE OUR WORLD; WHY, IN PARTICULAR, BELIEVERS SEE SOME THINGS AS WORTH FIGHTING AND DYING FOR." THIS MORNING I HAVE BROUGHT WITH ME, MY ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN RELIGIONS. THIS IS A 1989 EDITION THAT WAS PROVIDING TO ME BY MY SON-IN-LAW, RICHARD McELROY WHEN HE WORKED FOR GALE RESEARCH. I AM SURE THAT GALE, A RESEARCH COMPANY, HAS A NEW EDITION BY NOW – BUT SINCE RICHARD DOESN'T WORK THERE ANY LONGER, I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO GET ONE FOR FREE. THIS IS THE BOOK THAT I SHLEPP WITH ME WHEN I ADDRESS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ABOUT DIVERSITY AND RELIGION. MOST HIGH SCHOOLS HAVE A DIVERSITY DAY – AND THE AGENDA FOR THESE EVENTS FOCUSES ON PEOPLE'S ETHNIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND. RARELY DO THEY EVER OFFER A

WORKSHOP ON THE RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY THAT ACCOMPANIES PEOPLE WHEN THEY EMIGRATE TO A NEW COUNTRY. THE UNITED STATES, WHILE NOT HAVING AN OFFICIAL STATE RELIGION – HAS, BY CONTROLLING EMIGRATION SINCE ITS FOUNDING, CREATED A JUDEO/CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS CULTURE. ABOUT THE MIDDLE 1970’S EMIGRATION OPENED UP TO PEOPLE OF MIDDLE EASTERN AND EASTERN EUROPEAN DESCENT AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OUR COUNTRY’S HISTORY, A FLOOD OF PEOPLE WITH VARIED RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS FLOODED INTO THE US. FOLKS FROM RUMANIA, BULGARIA, RUSSIA, IRAQ, IRAN AND OTHERS TO NAME A FEW. WITH THEM CAME EASTERN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS, VARIOUS CATHOLIC DENOMINATIONS, MUSLIMS, CALDEANS, AND OTHERS. NOT ONLY DID THESE PEOPLE COME HERE WITH ANCIENT CULTURES AND TRADITIONS, THEY BROUGHT WITH THEM RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS THAT WERE TOTALLY FOREIGN TO A COUNTRY THAT FOR MORE THAN 200 YEARS ONLY UNDERSTOOD CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH. IT’S NO WONDER THAT WHEN I TELL MY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS THAT THERE ARE MORE THAN 38,000 DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN SECTS, WORLDWIDE, AND SO MANY IN THE US THAT WIKIPEDIA ANSWERED MY QUESTION AS TO HOW MANY DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN GROUPS ARE THERE IN THE US – THEY RESPONDED – AND I KID YOU NOT – WITH “GOD ONLY KNOWS” THEY DO NOT BELIEVE ME. UNTIL I SHOW THEM MY BOOK. AND I TELL THEM THAT THIS HUGE VOLUME LISTS, AS OF 1989, EVERY RELIGIOUS GROUP – CHRISTIAN AND OTHERWISE – THAT IS DOING BUSINESS AS A 501 3C WHICH IS THE GOVERNMENT’S TAX EXEMPT STATUS AFFORDED TO ALL REGISTERED RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. I WATCH THEIR FACES AND THEIR BODY LANGUAGE WHEN I GIVE THEM THIS NEWS. MANY OF THEM IMMEDIATELY TAKE A DEFENSIVE ATTITUDE. MANY FEEL THAT THEY MUST IMMEDIATELY TELL ME WHAT RELIGION THEY ARE AND THAT IT IS ONLY THEIR RELIGION THAT THEY BELIEVE TO BE AUTHENTIC AND TRUE. WHEN I POINT OUT THAT RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IS PART AND PARCEL OF THEIR DIVERSITY AWARENESS DAY – THEY REALLY STRUGGLE WITH THAT PIECE OF INFORMATION. PERHAPS BECAUSE IT GOES SO DEEPLY TO THEIR VARIOUS RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS THAT ALL PROFESS TO BE THE ONE TRUE RELIGION. IF YOU START WITH THAT PREMISE, IT IS DIFFICULT TO REALIZE THAT OTHER PEOPLE FOLLOW A DIFFERENT PATH – AND THAT THEIR PATH IS AS AUTHENTIC AND TRUE FOR THEM, AS THEIRS.

THAT WHETHER THEIR RELIGIOUS JOURNEY TAKES THEM TO CHURCH, TO A MOSQUE, TO A SYNAGOGUE, OR TO THE WOODS – ALL PATHS ARE DESIGNED TO LEAD TO GOD – BY WHATEVER NAME YOU CALL HIM OR HER. THE ARTICLE IN NEWSWEEK WENT ON TO SAY “HARVARD’S DISTASTE FOR ENGAGING WITH RELIGION AS AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT IS PARTICULARLY IRONIC, GIVEN THAT IT WAS FOUNDED IN 1636 AS A TRAINING GROUND FOR CHRISTIAN MINISTERS. ACCORDING TO THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, VERITAS WAS ONLY OFFICIALLY ADOPTED AS ITS MOTTO IN 1843; UNTIL THEN IT HAD BEEN CHRISTO ET ECCLESIAE (FOR CHRIST AND CHURCH.) WHILE IT’S TRUE THAT OTHER IVY LEAGUE COLLEGES DON’T REQUIRE UNDERGRADS TO TAKE RELIGION, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF COLUMBIA, RELIGION AT HARVARD DOESN’T EVEN MERIT ITS OWN DEPARTMENT. PROFESSORS WHO TEACH RELIGION CLASSES GENERALLY BELONG TO OTHER DEPARTMENTS – ANTHROPOLOGY OR NEAR EASTERN LANGUAGES. A COMMITTEE ON THE STUDY OF RELIGION OVERSEES THE COURSES, BUT IT CAN’T HIRE AND FIRE, AND IT CAN’T GRANT TENURE. DIANA ECK, A TOP SCHOLAR OF WORLD RELIGIONS WHO RUNS THE PROGRAM, ARGUES THAT ITS SECOND-CLASS STATUS PREVENTS IT FROM DRAWING THE BIGGEST TALENT TO CAMPUS – AND AS A RESULT THE MOST GIFTED STUDENTS. SINCE SO MANY OF OUR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTERS ARE GRADUATES OF THE HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL, I WAS CURIOUS AS TO HOW HARVARD WAS DEALING WITH THE UNDERGRADUATES WHO SHOW AN INTEREST IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES. APPARENTLY ANYONE SHOWING EVEN A PASSING INTEREST IN RELIGION ARE POINTED TO THE DIVINITY SCHOOL, A HALF A MILE AWAY FROM HARVARD YARD, WHERE THEY CAN TAKE GRADUATE-LEVEL COURSES ABOUT BELIEF FROM PEOPLE WHO ARE, BY TRADITION, BELIEVERS. THIS SEPARATION OF FAITH FROM REASON OCCURRED IN THE EARLY PART OF THE 19TH CENTURY, WHEN THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY EVOLVED INTO A SECULAR PLACE. EVEN NOW, IN AN ERA WHEN A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE CANNOT GET ELECTED WITHOUT A CONVINCING FAITH NARRATIVE THE SCHOLARS WHO STUDY BELIEF CONTINUE TO RESIDE IN THE DIVINITY SCHOOL. IT’S CLEAR THAT BOTH BELIEVING AND NON-BELIEVING SCHOLARS CLEARLY CAN TEACH ABOUT RELIGION IN A SECULAR SETTING WITHOUT CROSSING THE LINE INTO PROSELYTIZING. BEFORE I PRESENTED MY WORKSHOP TO THE STUDENTS AT BRIGHTON HIGH SCHOOL ON THEIR DIVERSITY DAY – I HAD TO SHOW MY MATERIAL

TO THE FACULTY TO MAKE SURE THAT I WAS NOT IN ANY WAY PROSELYTIZING FOR ANY PARTICULAR RELIGIOUS GROUP. I TRIED TO ASSURE THEM THAT THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A CRITICAL STUDY OF RELIGION AND HOW SIGNIFICANT IT IS IN LEARNING ABOUT THE HISTORY OF OUR HUMAN FAMILY. SAM HARRIS IN HIS BOOK THE END OF FAITH, TALKS ABOUT THE FACT THAT “FLUENCY IN RELIGIOUS HISTORY AND TEXTS, IS THE SHARPEST WEAPON AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISM.” I WOULD SUGGEST THAT THERE ARE YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN ENLISTING IN THE MILITARY RIGHT OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL FROM EVERY SMALL TOWN ACROSS AMERICA – WHO MAY NEVER HAVE MET A PERSON FROM ANOTHER ETHNIC GROUP OR RELIGIOUS GROUP. IT WOULD HAVE SERVED THEM WELL TO HAVE A CLASS OR TWO WHILE STILL IN HIGH SCHOOL TO PREPARE THEM FOR WHAT THEY MAY EXPERIENCE IN PLACES LIKE IRAQ, IRAN, AND AFGHANISTAN. MY GUESS IS THAT THERE ARE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN THE US WHO HAVE NOT A CLUE WHAT MUSLIMS BELIEVE OR WHY – OR WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CALDEAN ARAB? IF WE DON’T UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE BELIEVE IN AND VALUE AND WHAT SHAPES THEIR DECISION MAKING – WE ARE AT A HUGE DISADVANTAGE IN EVER HOPING TO CREATE PEACEFUL EXISTENCE. IDEALLY WE SHOULDN’T WAIT EVEN UNTIL HIGH SCHOOL. TEACHERS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS TELL ME THAT THEY SEE THIS MISTRUST AND MISUNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THEIR STUDENTS AND THE STUDENT’S PARENTS ALL THE TIME. CHILDREN COME TO SCHOOL AND HARASS OTHER CLASSMATES ABOUT WHAT RELIGION THEY ARE AND THAT IF THEY DON’T BELIEVE IN THEIR PARTICULAR CHURCH OR GOD – THEY ARE GOING TO HELL. IT WOULD DO WELL TO GET THE INFORMATION OUT TO PEOPLE AT AN EARLIER AGE THAT WITH NO LESS THAN 38,000 DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS GROUPS, THERE IS GOING TO BE A VARIETY OF WAYS TO WORSHIP. NOW THE IRONY OF MY CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WAS THAT COMPARATIVE RELIGION WAS VERY MUCH A PART OF OUR CURRICULUM. SO AT AN EARLY AGE I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO STUDY THE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS. I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT THIS HAS HELPED ME A GREAT DEAL THROUGHOUT MY LIFE IN RECOGNIZING THAT THERE ARE SO MANY RITUALS AND TRADITIONS AND WAYS OF BEING SPIRITUAL. THE IRONIC PART OF THIS INSTRUCTION WAS THAT AS ROMAN CATHOLICS WE WERE TAUGHT THAT THEIR WAY, OF COURSE, WAS WRONG. NOT THAT THE PEOPLE WERE BAD, THEY WERE JUST MIS-INFORMED.

AND IT WAS OUR MISSION AS ROMAN CATHOLICS TO SET THEM STRAIGHT. EVEN AT A YOUNG AGE, I THOUGHT THAT WAS RATHER PRETENTIOUS. AFTER ALL, SOME OF THOSE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS HAD BEEN AROUND MUCH LONGER THAN CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM. COULD ALL THOSE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN WRONG AND DID ALL THOSE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN ALL THOSE FAR AWAY PLACES CONTINUE TO BE WRONG? I HAD MY SERIOUS DOUBTS. A RECENT STUDY SHOWS THAT HARVARD STUDENTS ARE INCREASINGLY CHURCHGOING, BIBLE STUDYING AND BELIEVING. JAY HARRIS, THE DEAN WHO ADMINISTERS THE GENERAL EDUCATION WAS QUOTED AS SAYING “WE HAVE A VERY STRONG EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY. WE HAVE WOMEN WALKING AROUND IN HIJABS. IN SPITE OF THIS SO CALLED EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY ON CAMPUS, THE DISINCLINATION OF THE HARVARD FACULTY TO BRING RELIGION FRONT AND CENTER PUTS TEACHERS AT RISK OF BEING RADICALLY OUT OF STEP WITH THEIR STUDENTS. GROWING UP AFTER 9/11, YOU NEED TO FATHOM HOW OTHER PEOPLE THINK. WITH RATIONALITY, IT WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND HOW SOMEONE COULD GET ON A PLANE AND DO THAT.” THIS YEAR’S FRESHMEN, THE CLASS OF 2013, ARE THE FIRST TO BENEFIT FROM THE NEW GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS THAT PASSED, FINALLY, IN 2007. DURING THEIR TENURE AT HARVARD, UNDERGRADUATES NOW HAVE TO TAKE ONE COURSE IN EACH OF EIGHT CATEGORIES, INCLUDING TWO IN SCIENCE AND ONE IN MATH. THEY HAVE TO TAKE ONE COURSE IN A LOOSE CATEGORY CALLED CULTURE AND BELIEF, WHICH INCLUDES RELIGION COURSES BUT ALSO CLASSES IN PHOTOGRAPHY, MYTHOLOGY, AND THE LITERATURE OF THE QUEST. A STUDENT, IN OTHER WORDS, CAN GRADUATE FROM HARVARD WITHOUT HAVING TO GRAPPLE DIRECTLY WITH QUESTIONS ABOUT A WORLD IN WHICH PEOPLE DEFINE THEMSELVES AND THEIR HISTORIES ACCORDING TOT HEIR VIEWS OF GOD. THE AUTHOR OF THE ARTICLE IN NEWSWEEK WENT TO VISIT HARVARD YARD. SHE MET A SOPHOMORE IN A BASEMENT PUB. THE STUDENT WAS RAISED IN QUEENS, NY AND EDUCATED, AS GENERATIONS OF IRISH CATHOLICS HAVE BEEN, BY JESUITS WHO SAW IN HIM SOME PROMISE, THE STUDENT WAS FORTHRIGHT ABOUT A DESPONDENT FEELING HE HAD, IN CLASS AND AMONG HIS FRIENDS; NEITHER THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGY THAT FRAMED HIS THINKING NOR THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY THAT GAVE HIM COMFORT WERE APPROPRIATE SUBJECTS FOR DISCUSSION. HE ONCE OVERHEARD

STUDENTS IN THE DORM MAKING FUN OF HIS ROSARY. HE WAS QUOTED AS SAYING “I DO NOT THINK THERE WOULD BE ANY OPENNESS TO DISCUSSING GOD IN ANY OF THE CLASSES I TOOK LAST YEAR. BUT ACKNOWLEDGING THE FACT THAT RELIGION EXISTS AND THAT IT’S NOT LUNACY TO BELIEVE IN GOD WOULD BE HELPFUL.” IT WOULD BE HELPFUL, INDEED. ONE OF THE GREATEST GIFTS WE GIVE OUR SUNDAY SCHOOL CHILDREN IS THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ROOTS, BUT ALSO TO BECOME FAMILIAR WITH MANY OTHER FAITH COMMUNITIES. TO DISMISS THE IMPORTANCE OF A STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS - ESPECIALLY IN THE DIVERSE WORLD IN WHICH THEY LIVE – DOES NOT PREPARE THEM TO DEFEND THEIR OWN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS. RELIGION IS AN IMPORTANT AND SIGNIFICANT PART OF WHO WE ARE – JUST AS WE WISH TO BE KNOWN FOR WHO WE REALLY ARE AND WHAT WE BELIEVE – SO DO OTHERS. SO BE IT.

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