

Other Writings by Ed Christman

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Bicentennial Thoughts

(About 1975)

“Religion has to do with whatever people give final significance to, especially if they tell the story of this significance in the language of myths and symbols, gather for rituals and ceremonies to support it, give special explanations for what goes on behind visible reality, prop it up in social forms, and produce special behavior patterns.”

Historical analysis of how religious this period was: institutionalized religion present and related to it was the individualism which demanded tolerance of “enlightenment views” not unreligious, but there was a mix which included explicit myth making, ethical patterns, belief in divine power present.

Nineteenth century included revivalism which created and reinforced certain cultural patterns but also related to social reform issues including slavery and the transcendentalists, grew out of older religious forms and offered something of their own piety. And the twentieth century reaffirmed what was true but perhaps now more so: all options are possible regardless of whether called faddish, crazy, or old line conservative. Whatever might be said of other nations we offer the variety, under law and with considerable moral sanction by the people.

“We as Christians and Jews as fish is to water,” H. Richard Niebuhr. Since many of the modern expressions of religion are in trouble we should remember [that] these forms – Sunday school, missions, voluntary societies, denominationalism – came into existence about the time America did as a nation; hundreds of years of Jewery and Christianity survived and new forms can be discovered but this is a lesson taught by history, not be looking at a present day balance sheet and giving religion, institutionalized religion especially, an F on the course of where we are and where we are going as a nation.

Any type of societal communal frame for religion means that individual differences can be compared; we learn by comparison and whenever there are symbols that bring differing folk together they discover what they do hold in common and what separates them so that the religious issue for institutions is always whether what holds differences in healthy tension has greater power than what insists that these differences be they religions, political, or whatever prompts an ultimatum of division. Secondly, communal

nature of religion means that though Christ died for all people, in a free moral society not all respond; therefore, there is a difference between believers in Christianity and in other faiths or in the faith of individualism and this difference cannot be ignored nor it be lamented, provided as authentic balance is maintained.

In an effort to evaluate the meaning of religion in America, it is difficult to get much help from the media, partly because their business is often the abnormal which sells advertising and partly because they do not know what they are about when they attempt to report on religious realities. To be sure, churches and synagogues are accountable for their reluctance to admit weaknesses publicly and confess their faults, but there is a truthfulness heretofore associated with newspapers, magazines, and most of all TV which is greater than their capacity to deliver the truth about a situation. Church and state separation are not involved for what we are talking about is the duty imposed on those who under the first A [amendment?] are free, the freedom especially of the fourth estate. We hope that the moral duty is to be intelligent and fair as well as free and if we have to choose we would hope they were intelligence because fairness can work itself out and the religious people of America need not fear intelligent reporting of what goes on in the name of religion; we have a great deal to fear from ignorance. One can certainly discover non-religious communities to nourish and support all sorts of individualism but one can still find in ghetto and on the farm, in the suburbs and even in the plight of the migratory worker a sense of community founded on religious principles.

American "established" non-establishment of religion in order to guarantee considerable pluralism, pluralism meant that there could be many different establishments offering options religiously for people to choose and as the form of government became a checks and balances system so the protestant, catholic, jewish et al system provided a similar check and balance to prevent the excesses of religious intolerance which had led the ancestors of our forefathers to kill in the name of God. One hopes the growing secularism which is a kind of religion will be as tolerant as those who affirm traditional religious views. [Handwritten note: AAAA (presumably American Association for the Advancement of Agnosticism) has not had any martyrs. Agnostics have flourished, especially in higher ed and people have not abandoned public or private ed nor have they generally punished agnosticism as a crime or as a sin.]

While our system of checks and balances means that you cannot legislate morality, you can legislate the environment in which changes are more likely to occur. Religious resources have helped oppressed minorities survive in America where racism certainly has been part of the fabric, but one must observe that as a nation, there has been more variety attempting to find common ground and part of the ability to believe such a pluralism can work is religious in nature. People find the doctrine of reparations virtually impossible to accept, Christians included, yet that doctrine is a recourse for trying to grasp some of the racial conflict in America and why some react and over-react as they do once the actual bonds of slavery are loosened slightly. Trying to right wrongs is never easy but there has been a failure to make concessions, for example, in business so that labor becomes excessive in its demands, getting reparations in a sense; if blacks have not had a decent school when in the urban centers they outnumber the

whites either our kind of school or no school at all. But there is within the religious fabric of America the possibility to make accommodations to the rights of people.

One of the strong parallels between our system of politics and our system of religion government is the congregational model of governance of many churches which does tend to spread authority and involve a greater number of people; this is balanced with the belief if religious proclamation is in fact everyone's job it may become everyone's felt duty; therefore, there is a need for a clerical group, sensitive to the abuses of power which religious or political leaders must avoid. "My own mind is a church" is what Thomas Paine is reported to have said, suggested no need for a priesthood, and Jefferson's statement about sweating eternal hostility to every form of tyranny is supposed to have been uttered in the context of religious tyranny. Since the "religion of America," which is enlightenment one should observe there were few if any rights accorded to women or blacks and that although churches have not been without fault in this area, the religious movements of the 19th century were of considerable significance in raising these questions. Indeed, if secularism which traces its American heritage to Paine, Jefferson, et al, is really as important as it claims, then it must accept responsibility for much that is wrong with America rather than blaming the errors on religion, while claiming credit for what is recognized as equity or justice or a liberal spirit. Secularists usually fudge a bit, marvelous counter punchers, they don't stick out the chin.

Charity is American for many motives and only a complete cynic would try to discredit the enormous ways in which religious spirit of charity has been expressed at home and overseas. The religious connection is often muted for some when they point out that the barons of industry only give out of a sense of guilt for having exploited some others to attain great wealth; I would point out that but for religion there would not be a sense of guilt and that the remorse movements v. exploitation while not the sole possession of religion has definite connections. Personal guilt is not evil because it is often connected to the reality of a conscience trying to balance the need for concentrations of power which in fact advance civilization with the needs of the poor and disenfranchised and the need for diversity of centers of power to keep people involved. Although the past generation of rich were often ruthless they did have a conscience which would prick them; the question for America is whether in its secular mood there is a baseline, a standard effectively present within secularism that will prick consciences or indeed whether conscience will be a functional reality. The tendency toward amorality leaves doubt that the charitable impulse will remain as strong unless religious claims penetrate the secularism of our day.

One nation, under God, may seem strange, especially if one believed we were one nation under Canada. To decide we were chosen, if that is what the phrase means, is a theological assumption of considerable proportions; remembering that in slightly over a decade after President Eisenhower had that inserted into the pledge to the flag we lost our first war. If we are chosen, we should be reminded that the Hebrews were chosen, chosen to lose lots of times because they misunderstood chosenness. When religion has played a significant role in the history of a people it can be co-opted to serve

government, business, and culture generally and lose its uniqueness. And when everyone is religious that can mean no one is seriously so or put another way, on the surface he is deeply religious [but] down deep he is very shallow. Is not the task of religion to ask all the questions, even if it is afraid of some of the answers being an indictment of broken religious covenants or misplaced loyalties in terms of civil religion or some substitutes for authentic faith in God that expresses itself in terms of his commands to do justly love mercy and walk humbly with Him.

Balance between affliction and comfort which Christianity seeks to provide in priest and prophet. Power of religion is strength and hope when we despair of being able to provide strength and hope by and for ourselves. Provides an accurate self estimate of who we are and might become Dares to be credible [and] authentic in a world understandably cynical, suspicious and sick of overly simple solutions and overly promising saviors ... chosenness means captivity is a possibility as well as honor of a Solomon ... afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, never satisfied because its achievements as Body or Christ never completed.

Ben Hur portrait means that there is some mystery in all religion, something beyond not fully understood and certainly subject to misinterpretation. Juries generally hear so much stuff but make accurate findings; people hear about religions and ultimately can make own judgment.

A Raisin in the Sun: when does your brother need you but now when he is broken?
A Man of La Mancha, Guernica, King, Blood of the Lamb, the Messiah, Godspell, the Hiding Places provide inspiration interpretation as does Romans, Amos, Genesis 6, etc.
One Flew over the Nest, ... The Pawnbroker.

Creation and Alienation

(mid-1970s?)

Creation is related to history, not to the shape and protection of the natural order; this connection distinguished Hebrew faith from that of its Canaanite neighbors and may, to some extent, explain why we remain shy about attributing acts of divine intervention to natural acts within the realm of nature; instead such events, especially the tragic ones are viewed as part of a process which is both tragic and rewarding as part of a divine history to be fully understood not by designating certain events as punishments or rewards, drought or abundance of water, but as aspects of a larger more comprehensive historical interaction between creator and creatures. Relationship or the lack of it remains far more crucial than a hurricane destroys people and goods, which viewed in divine terms is not a life and death issue at all. That we should have to see such events as life and death issues is understandable because we are creatures within the process, more likely to grasp for immediate proximate explanations for why and how things occur than the more ultimate reasons which remain only partly known and often [are] obscured by the immediacy of tragedy when holocausts destroy.

When we view creation as relationship made clear in a series of covenants we realize that it is the point at which these covenants are broken or under threat that Y [Yahweh] speaks to covenant people, that it is at the very point of our feeling kinship with a covenant breaker that we sense both the excitement of creating relationships of trust and those which fly apart at the first opportunity. To ask where are you is more than geography; rather it is to ask in terms of religious geography where are you in relationships to the Y of creation. Where is your brother is to further define the religious geography in terms of whether a relationship has been broken by destroying one of the parties thereby ending it without the possibility of it being renewed. What Christianity would assert is that Jesus called Christ who writes new covenants, who is that covenant stands at the very point of danger whether covenants will be made, can be kept or will be renewed, redeemed. Christ's sense of the forsaken is a portrayal of the alienation completed in order that for him to say I and the father are one is made true, that the relationship is made permanently possible, no longer depending upon a remnant; rather Christ is that power which makes possible the renewal of each and every covenant, gracefully.

Some Scriptures and Questions

(mid-1970s?)

Solomon prays for wisdom, to discern what is right. The response is that of what he asked for plus worldly power and lengthened life, 1 Kings 3: 10f. Aftersight makes this a dangerous temptation, it seems, for did not some ask for wisdom, remain confused and get no kingdoms? How do we value the possibilities of rewards as a consequence of prayers?

Jesus prays that disciples be kept from the evil one, not that they be delivered from the world. This is a prayer of protection, lead us not into temptation yet lead us into the place of service in the world. Hence a conflict because if evil is earth bound, how can one hardly be kept from the evil one as distinguished from the control of the evil forces which abide. Will need to pray this prayer often.

There is a proof text for foxhole prayer, Psalm 51:15 says that those who believe in the Lord should call upon him in time of trouble. And the reward is that God will deliver the petitioner who will glorify God. Many of the psalms reflect the idea that prayer is conversation, hearing listening but a great deal of demanding. Jeremiah is a conversationalist as [are] Isaiah, Abraham and Moses. Even those of us who fail to listen to the words of others can discipline ourselves to be conversationalists who hear the sounds of God and there is no fruitless prayer unless the prayer decides in advance what the fruit is to be.

Does Shalom have modern equivalents in take care, have a good day, hang tough? Perhaps for all expressions of hope for we cannot create a relaxing day free from problems or doubts or failure but we can hope for some good, some meaning, some

affirmation to attend that person, even if we have doubts it will happen; in fact, unless done as flippant ritual, these prayer-like phrases are offered when there is more than normal reason to see the need for some light, some cool water, some hope for the one to whom these words are offered.

Must distinguish between public and private prayer. What a person is prepared to say, to confess, need not be uttered so as to involve another person except God. There is no mini course in theology going on; usually there is urgency, fear, guilt surfacing and crying out, Oh Lord, help me. There are non-public but communal prayers offered around a dinner table between parents and children, prayer partners where there may be a great deal of confessing but often some one-upmanship and we should not assume that prayer partners are necessarily persons of the opposite sex, often confusing other legitimate interests. Then there are prayers either spontaneous or prepared deliberately offered to an on behalf of a group, hopefully prepared to hear and participate in that offering to God. These prayers are more general yet run the risk of being mini-sermons. Public prayers may be specific in reciting the record of our evil and folly and draw hostile reactions from those who think the analysis unfair, the judgmental character of what is said an imposition upon the hearers. The prayer should be aware of these dangers but following the Biblical models some prayers did anger the power brokers in and outside of the synagogue or the church.

[Hand-written note describes the parallels between prayer and jogging. With jogging, often need someone else; experience certain sights and sounds; involve getting into a pattern and regularity, lose concentration and regain it, and have a sense of flushing out, clearing the air of any concerns, such as grief. When done with others, jogging like prayer benefits from encouragement, by thinking about folks who run, folks see you on their way back, when you're starting, thumbs-up is my sign.]

Religion and the United States (mid-1970s?)

The Republic began with some adherents to religion and other adherents to views which are not called religion. There was room for both as signers of the Declaration and has been as much or more variety in the subsequent 200 years.

Religion can be defined as what my own mind tells me and many Americans are religious without practicing any structural rites with others; the pluralism of this country has generally asserted this freedom as much as the freedom to organize, worship, serve, and conserve those stories and symbols which portray what religion means to these people. [Handwritten note: Marriage counseling – “I believe in God but I don't go to church;” don't want to be hypocritical.]

Yet within specific communions, differences are recognized which are judged to be destructive of what holds individual persons together in a church community. Admittedly any structure that defines itself with stories and symbols, behavior patterns, interpretations of events and seeks to implant itself in a culture will exclude, at the level

of community, those who freely choose not to participate and make commitments which the stories prompt on the part of believers.

The Judeo Christian heritage has less to fear from fairness, bias for example in the media, than it has to fear from ignorance within the media. Unfortunately it seems sometimes this might be our choice as believers for although the media's freedom and ours to worship God are inseparable, we are hard pressed to overcome ignorance in reporting factually religious events, the status of religious institutions and the traditional, customary business as usual forms of religion as well as the more "news worthy" new different events and quasi-institutions under a religious banner.

Hopefully the growing secularism as a kind of anti-religion religion will be as tolerant of traditional historical religions as the latter have of the AAAA, none of which have been martyred for his or her doubts. Religious wars reveals that sin infects religious folk and perhaps with greater power to justify their acts. The war between the states was partly fought on religious grounds, leaving us able to see, we hope, how God's Word becomes a weapon in the hands of two different men.

Role of Religion in America (mid-1970s?)

Social reforms: abolition, civil rights, prison reform, anti-war, alcoholism excesses of capitalistic system (sweat shops), migratory labor, unionism

Law and order: South remains region which accepted judicial realities, seems to be dealing more affirmatively because people assume purpose, meaning accept some authority over them

Inst. charities: based on specific religious impetus (YMCA etc)

Missions: teaching translations, advancements which did not make for wealthy missionaries even if others took advantage

Community: no social life outside the church, often inclusive of folk, a source of strength and family stability

Death: affirmations about reality and belief in resurrection plus debunking some notions about punishment for sins, such debunking very helpful

Education: church-related schools and support of public schools; alternatives to state controlled education, place for investment by free enterprise, check and balance on larger less personal public institutions

Religion has two parts: private, individual dimension, and public social communal; its texts often reveal differences of opinion, varieties of experience high and low points in

commitment and generally less to fear from discussion than from keeping people ignorant of both the power and often the impotence of religious people. Wars and all is a dare to any other viewpoint. Emerges a King a Solsetizen [Solzhenitsyn], a Graham, a Billy Poteat at WF, countless people who shape and keep hope alive in commandments, covenants, stewardship, no matter what.

A story to tell ... symbols and ceremonies to represent that story ... actions of public and private nature which are based on the story. A desire to shape it. Trust in that story as represents good news that God is judge, model redeemer and comforter that we might grow in wisdom in stature in favor with God and man.

Congregationalism

(mid-1970s?)

Congregationalism offers as a model for religious institutions the same model as town meeting, legislative hall, [where] the individual ideal and power is tested within a larger group; hopefully no one gains absolute sway in church gathering or in congress, at the cathedral or in the white house. To be fragile and finite means we need one another to affirm both our differences and our similarities and together vigilant vs. every form of tyranny, for TJ [Thomas Jefferson] was as fearful of religious tyranny as any other form. Religion may help keep us aware that the temptations of power are considerable; conversely, the use of power redemptively offers considerable hope that lives of people can resemble the prophet's hope that justice and mercy will roll like an ever-flowing stream.

Since we all sense sometimes acts of grace, unaccounted-for favors without merit, worthwhileness beyond what we have done ourselves, we equally should recognize the sense of guilt for acts deliberately destructive of others. A sense of guilt points towards something able to accept and declare all things and people can be made new.

If we are "under God" we should recall that other chosen people were captives dispersed for their rebellion vs. God if we are to rejoice in their good times. Civil religion is hardly civil to extremes, nor is it deep enough to sustain complexities of life in which power is so concentrated and the threats to life and civilization are actually real not imaginary. Civil religion flattens our differences on the people that hold them and that pathway is a potential springboard to justify the actions of tyrants who would eradicate all freedoms, to believe or not believe in God and insist you believe in the tyrant. [Handwritten note: 'Why don't you trust us?' I cannot trust anyone who puts his faith solely in technology and not in God.]

Miracles

(1984 or later)

A miracle is something we have not seen before; therefore, we may not necessarily find others believing what we say unless they too are present and see the fire, the change, the dramatic event called miracle. This miracle story like many is associated with faith; the contrast is the story of the widow whose son has died; no faith only compassion, but in most stories there is a connection between the faith of the afflicted person and the power which heals; here it is the faith of friends but there is at least an inference of the faith of the paralytic. Each account is different in some significant details, just as any reporting of a miracle would be; our problems stem from the making of connections with that time and finding as miracle only those stories which have had the same psychological properties as the ones in the Bible. Indeed if faith is the key factor, how God would respond might vary considerably.

Fear is the response of many; praise of God and acceptance; the story introduces the ministry in Mark in such a way that after the whole story unfolds we certainly see what strategic placement we have. ...Wow would be the response, far out, did you see that; what we have seen on TV or the monastery with the copying machine* is a miracle only if you do not know what happened, only if certain facts are not known and unless all modern technology is some kind of miracle in terms of how men have used the gifts of God and to carry out dominion and power over the earth, we still are not very far.

Miracles have more to do with faith in God than faith producing miracles; those for whom miracles occur are the most surprised; be aware that one can work too hard, become too centered on miracle working. The story of the miracle worker [Anne Sullivan, teacher of, Helen Keller] suggests a long sustained effort without any assurance; there was stubbornness, compassionate stubbornness to help a child doomed otherwise to a limited life; scripture does not tell us hardly anything about the persons who have been healed; some were not even willing to say thanks; others are reported as one version here of praising God. Pray for healing but unless that particular prayer has been connected, no one knows; and prayers for families probably help but not nearly so dramatically;

Once upon a time a professor flunked out a student who later returned a changed person and the professor managed to take Fs off the former student's record; later the student now graduated helped the professor in a minor way but testified to the faith placed in him to use the chance to make for himself a better life, less crippled by the many handicaps most of which are invisible; those of us with oldest physical handicaps are better off than some; whatever our other handicaps are, lack of faith of disciplined life of prayer, whatever, may or may not get attention; in some ways any work of art is a miracle, a play directed by a talented, compassionate professional and a motley crew of people, some of whom have never had any interest and may be completing a humanities requirement, jell into a marvelous drama which is fun; likes a challenge; and Jesus did too, especially when he dealt with those who were hung up on words.

In the movie *Oh God*, both part 1 and 2 [1977,1984], the court, the preachers and the psychiatrists sought to ignore those events they could not write down without being laughed at by those not present; miracles run the risk of becoming too big a deal as with shrines, not that this is wrong but does suggest that miracles do not fit into the vision we normally use to understand life; faith does move mountains and people are healed of diseases and the relation of faith to what occurs in the operating room is attested to not by religious extremists as by physicians practicing their skills; the term heal can mean save, and the word for savior often attributed to Jesus also means physician.

Sin is suggested to be a kind of profound disease not that the sinner is punished for some wrong acts but whatever is out of harmony with God can be expressed in different ways, including in a physical condition; disease can focus on faith not in a cure but that life has substance and power regardless of being paralyzed; the faith was in others who assumed that there was something special about Jesus, even before the news reports had been scattered abroad; at least that is the way Mark puts it but actually there were stories and can you imagine hearing today about a healing and not believing it; I visited a shrine where miracles of healing have occurred and I have been to a church, where they occur, but I was curious at the first and afraid at the second.

A miracle is an event in which one sees an act of God. Did the miracles in the Bible occur? Did Jesus actually heal a paralytic who picked up his bed and ran home not even thanking those who had lowered him through the roof? Are there miracles of physical healing or any other kind today?

One work which ought to be associated with miracle is judgment, because for God to be present there seems to mean a choice as between those to see and hear and those who do not; nay wondrous sign or event attributed to God confronts those present and possibly the rest of us with a question: how do I judge that event and by the answer to that question we are likely to grasp somewhat the meaning of divine judgment. But many of us never think he or she has been even close to a miracle, maybe to the site of a miracle like a shrine or in a church or even in the life of a person seen by the community as a miraculous person embodying God's presence in their manner; we call a person in this church saint, maybe two, to whom no specific miracles have been attributed but that may be part of our misconception of a miracle. Prodigy and portent are suitable other words superior to sign and wonder as miracle-like in nature. A sign is an omen of things to come, a kind of prophesy emphasizing divine power, something not possible for one of us creatures to accomplish without God.

* This reference is to a 1975 award-winning television commercial about a monk with a Xerox machine in his monastery; it ends with a voice over 'it's a miracle.'