

THEOLOGY FOR A SECULAR AGE

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Introduction

- Theology is the process of using language to describe certain kinds of experience; it's what happens when the silence ends.
- Freedom—absence of coercion—is politically necessary but not religiously sufficient.
- What we have in common with other members of our group makes us a kind and helps create a sense of unity. Each member of a kind is also a unique instance; its identity is based on its difference from others, creating a sense of diversity.
- In a secular age, people have options—to believe or not to believe, to be part of a community of faith or not. By most accounts, religion poses the greatest threat to our shared future, rather than providing the greatest source of hope.
- The goal of this course: to sketch a third way between competing fundamentalisms of the left and right; to suggest how we might begin to think about faith and religion, as well as religious community and ethical conduct, in a different way.

1. How do we know what we most truly know?

- John Dewey (1930s): world is divided between those who employ the method of doctrine (body of fixed beliefs taught and learned as true, closed to new insights) and those who employ the method of intelligence (ongoing process of inquiry and discovery, open to new insights and accessible to everyone). What is at stake? The trustworthiness of our experience.
- St. Augustine (4th Century): “I believe, therefore I understand.” Children of the Enlightenment move in the opposite direction: not from belief to understanding, but from understanding to belief. We take everything we know into account as we decide what to believe. Enlightened faith never asks us to set aside what we know.
- Belief in supernatural revelation meant that every religion had its own set of facts, miraculously delivered from on high. In the modern world, none of us are entitled to our own set of facts. However, facts can mean many different things and be deployed for many different purposes. The main function of religious faith is not to affirm that certain facts are true. Rather, it is to develop a life of meaning and purpose in light of what we know. In so doing, faith transforms our character and animates our conduct.
- Children of Israel accepted the Ten Commandments as authentic because they were validated by the forces of nature (fire, smoke, etc.). For children of the Enlightenment, our experience of the natural world doesn't merely validate the truth; it is the source of truth.

2. What is the nature of existence and how do we fit into the picture?

- In the past, some argued that the basic nature of things is spiritual, that the important and lasting part of a human being is the soul; others maintained that the basic nature of things is material, and what we call mind and spirit are interactions between substances. Neither view seems adequate.
- Alfred North Whitehead (1920's): “Speculative philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”

- Delphic oracle (ancient Greece): a boat is not the material it is made from, but the relationship among the planks.
- Walt Whitman (1850's): "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." The essence of an individual is all the relationships he or she represents. If teased all the way out in space and all the way back in time, these relationships ultimately include everything whatsoever. This is the fundamental fact of all existence: we are constituted by relationships. Whitehead: "We are dependent on the universe for every detail of our experience." This principle applies to everything whatsoever.
- The first principle of the universe is not independence (each thing that exists is a thing unto itself), but rather the opposite: utter dependence.
- Whitehead: Each moment of life "arises as an effect facing its past and ends as a cause facing its future."

3. What in the world is divine—if anything?

- Human conceptions of God have vacillated between two theological extremes: God as transcendent (apart from the natural world, creator and judge), and God as immanent (exists within the natural world as principle of order).
- Scientists try to describe the physical world and explain its workings; theologians try to interpret human experience and account for its meaning. Periodic table of theological elements is laid out in terms of meaning, purpose, and value. Theologians ask: what ideas we need to have about the world in order to interpret our experience and account for its meaning to us. In my view, one necessary idea is the idea of God (God exists in the way beauty exists, but not in the way a person or an apple exists).
- In my thinking, the idea of God is necessary to explain two kinds of experience. One has to do with the past (our sense that, just as atoms are never lost in physical reactions, so no human experience—however sad or tragic—is ever suffered alone or eternally forgotten). The other has to do with the future (our sense that possibilities must come from somewhere, and that the future can unfold in a purposive and meaningful way, even though it sometimes doesn't).
- A God that children of the Enlightenment can believe in can't save a favored believer or clear a parking spot when it rains. Consciousness and choice enter the divine picture only through us—through our consciousness and our choices (thus, to say that we are the presence of God in this world is not a metaphor).

4. What is the uniquely human challenge?

- What is the human condition such that we need to be saved? What is the problem to which a political, or social, or psychological solution is insufficient?
- The Christian doctrine of original sin (the sin of disobedience) justified the authority of the church and the use of state power to enforce the church's soul-saving dictates. But without a supernatural revelation of divine decrees that must be obeyed, the fundamental problem that needs to be solved isn't one caused by disobedience.
- Without a supernatural God and a super-villain Devil, the human tendency is to believe we are on our own: no source beyond our own longing, and no destiny beyond our own striving.
- The first principle of the universe is utter dependence: we are constituted by our relationships. The most profound human error—the fundamental human sin—is to live as though we're not dependent, but rather self-reliant and self-sufficient.

- Leigh Eric Schmidt (2005): Americans are restless souls: many have rejected their inherited faith traditions and become spiritual seekers, turning to individualized sources of enlightenment, and thus become spiritual rather than religious.
- John Weiss (1871): “America is an opportunity to make a Religion out of the sacredness of the individual.”
- The challenge for the individual, once emancipated from the need to seek salvation for the next life, was to find meaning and purpose in this life. The search took myriad forms, many of them either generated or shaped by the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau).
- Is the goal of the seeker perennially to be searching and exploring, or is it to find a new religious home?

5. What are the purpose of faith and the role of religion?

- William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Goal of his book: 1) to establish that the backbone of religion was the experience of the individual believer and not philosophy or doctrine; 2) “to make the hearer or reader believe, as I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of religion as a whole is humanity’s most important function.”
- Whitehead: the point of religious belief is not simply to affirm that something is true. It is to make yourself a better person and your world a better place. Transformation is the main function of religion.
- Faith is a leap of the moral imagination that connects the world as it is to the world as it might become (not solely a product of reason, or knowledge, or evidence, or even of experience, though each plays an important role in faith). Faith looks at what is and imagines what might be. Without something to sustain it, however, faith will eventually come crashing down. Faith needs an external means of support: stories to restore our courage, symbols to remind us of commitments we have made, and daily rituals to renew our resolve. Religion is the collection of external forms we use—songs, symbols, stories, rituals, obligations, sacred spaces—to carry our faith along from day to day and generation to generation. Faith is a commitment from within that is sustained and renewed by the way of living we call religion.
- If religion can sustain and renew faith, it can also become rigid and coercive—an obstacle to faith and a barrier against it. Thus religion must continually be renewed.
- In a changing world, people of authentic faith keep the book of religion open. The goal is for the form of religion without to enliven the substance of faith within. If religion becomes an end in itself, then faith becomes demonic. For many of us, the challenge lies at the other end of the spectrum: we champion faith, but dismiss religion.
- Diana Eck (2007): we are “the church of the new millennium”—a unique faith, embracing both the certainty of science and the mystery of the spirit. In other words, ours is a faith for children of the Enlightenment.
- Many people have given up on organized religion, either because they believe religion is mainly a dysfunction of the human mind (Freud, Marx, Dennett), or because they believe religion is solely an intuition of the human heart (Emerson, modern seekers).
- Some religions are better than others (Universalism was a statement about the goodness of God, not the goodness of humanity or human belief).
- Religion is something particular. George Santayana: the attempt to have a religion without having a particular religion is like trying to speak without speaking a particular language.

- Religion is a way of life that happens with a community of faith. Paul Tillich: our moral imperative is to become a person in a community of persons. In the same way as one cannot be a citizen without being a citizen of a particular country, so one cannot fully be a person without a being a member of a community.

6. What does it mean to be a religious community?

- What is a community of faith? It is first and foremost a place of constant beginning.
- The experience of religious community has two aspects: the community part, and the religious part. The experience of community is most palpable during worship—which makes a religious community religious. We evoke our connection not just to each other, but also to the spirit of life itself. Worship is religious practice. It's where we learn how to wait and listen, how to be truthful and faithful. It's where we learn to be fully present to ourselves and to each other.
- The hallmark of worship, in turn, is a religious experience that reminds us of the fundamental truth about ourselves and our world. Religion is an experience—a feeling, Friedrich Schleiermacher called it. The liberal tradition in theology flows from the declaration that religion is first and foremost an experience. What kind of experience? Schleiermacher: a feeling of absolute, or unqualified, dependence on God (we say: an experience of utter dependence, period).
- The religious experience of utter dependence is two-fold: a realization and a response. Realization: we grasp how insignificant, fleeting, and needy we are, and how profoundly we are connected to everything that is. Response: gratitude—the defining element of our faith. (Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, Islam by submission, Unitarian Universalism by gratitude.)
- Gratitude links us to the past by revealing to us our identity: how we became who we are, and it links us to the future by revealing to us our duty: what we owe back in return. It requires a discipline of gratitude, constantly acknowledge our utter dependence upon the sources that make our lives possible, and demands an ethic of gratitude, working for a future in which all relationships—among humans, as well as between humans and the physical world—are fair, constructive, and beautiful.
- The main reason we go to worship is not for the novelty but for the consistency: the comfort of the liturgy, the solace of the music, the reassuring sight of familiar faces, the enduring presence of ancient rites and timeless symbols. These remind us to recall our commitments, make known our needs, and voice our gratitude.

7. How shall we live in order to transform ourselves and our world?

- Enlightened religion seeks to unite the best of the wisdom traditions with the best of modern knowledge, in order to forge ethical ideas that give our lives meaning and purpose. Ethics asks about the overall values that determine how we should live.
- Right, good, wrong, and evil are part of our experience. Where do these values come from? For much of human history, people believed God had given them rules to live by. Rules based on supernatural revelation are often inconsistent and contradictory.
- If not from God, perhaps we simply make rules up: moral relativism. If relativism is the ultimate ethical principle, however, then tolerance becomes the highest moral virtue. But some actions are intolerable.
- Fundamental insight of the ethic of gratitude: I am constituted by—made up of—the world I inhabit. Thus, I am responsible to nurture the people and world upon whom I

wholly depend. To say I am dependent on something means that it constitutes a part of my world, and therefore constitutes a part of me.

- Elaine Scarry (2001): the experience of beauty has a built-in consequence: fairness—refers both to loveliness and to the ethical requirement to be fair, play fair, or distribute fairly. Beauty issues a call to symmetry and equality, a call to be just.
- John Rawls (1971): Justice as fairness has two basic principles. Principle of equal liberty (each person is entitled to the greatest amount of basic liberty, consistent with an equal amount for everyone else) and the difference principle (social and economic inequalities must be distributed to the greatest advantage of the least-well-off person).
- The ethic of gratitude demands that we focus on three areas that have been an afterthought for traditional religious ethics: the status of disadvantaged and marginalized people, especially women (Luce Irigaray, Riane Eisler, Potts and Hayden); the way we treat animals and plants that provide our sustenance (Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, Colin and Thomas Campbell); and the way we care for the environment (*The Story of Stuff, Planet Earth*).
- Quantum leap: vast changes in the physical world are simply the accumulated difference made by an infinite number of small changes.

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