

RELIGION

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The Dilemma of Contemporary Jewish Ethics

A Lecture by Eugene B. Borowitz

summarized by Rosie Hurwitz

Dr. Eugene Borowitz, described as a Renaissance man and learned Judaic scholar, delivered on April 24 the 1985 Kansas School of Religion lecture following several meetings on the campus with religion classes and students. His topic, "The Dilemma of Contemporary Jewish Ethics," encompassed a review of the development of the concept of ethics. Dr. Borowitz described ethics as a "Greek notion" which appeared first in the works of Aristotle, relating to reality and a sense of duty. The notion of ethics in Judaism appeared only 175 years ago. The word does not appear in either the Bible or the Talmud.

Dr. Borowitz described the development of the three major branches of Judaism and related the idea of being "modern" to Kant's idea of contemporary ethics—that the modern person operates in three realms of mental activity: aesthetics, mathematics and ethics.

Since a modern person with a universal mind must be involved in all three areas, everyone must be included. The rational mind also describes things in terms of law. If ethics must take the form of law, then Jews had the most modern religion because theirs is a religion of law.

The very essence of Judaism, as described by Dr. Borowitz, is its ethics. The basis of the law is its training to be decent, caring, and to help build a world where peace, humanity and justice reign. The very heart of the Jewish obligation is not just to the Jewish community, but to all of humanity. Jews agree that ethics is indeed the heart of Jewish responsibility.

In reflecting back on my own upbringing as a Jewish child in a small southeastern Kansas community, I realize that the word "ethics" was not a part of the day to day vocabulary my parents used to teach my two younger sisters and me what was appropriate thought and behavior. They taught their own sense of ethics largely through example. One was expected to nurse the sick, to feed the hungry and to participate to the fullest in activity that would help that small community provide the best possible life for all its inhabitants. Sabbath candles were lighted in our home on Friday evenings and Jewish holidays explained, observed and shared with gentile friends and neighbors. My husband, who similarly grew up in a small Kansas community, received an almost identical set of values from his parents.

According to Dr. Borowitz, the Jewish individual is involved with God as part of the Jewish community, but always as an individual making his or her own decisions.

This opens the way for a plurality of ways to be Jewish, but ways derived from a relationship with God as part of a community. He cites this as the fundamental Jewish existential stance. His lecture is summarized here.

My approach, as will probably become clear, is somewhat parochial, going into things historically so as to set our mutual concern in a somewhat different context, and I hope that will enrich your appreciation of what we are both working on: What I'd like to do is give you an illustration of a traditional religion trying to come to grips with problems posed by modernity—specifically how it engages the question of general ethics; tries to relate those general ethics to its own particular vision; and how learning things in the process of generations and in fact nearly now two centuries of working at this problem, still finds the problems unresolved. I shall propose some suggestions of my own as to how the problem might be resolved.

I have been going around talking to a great many people since I've been here. But I must express my thanks to Lynn Taylor for sharing me with the various other groups on campus. It has given me a very broad exposure to different people and an opportunity to talk to very many people. And I have enjoyed that. As I think I said, this is one place from which I will take a good deal away with me, and I'm very appreciative of that. I'm glad too because it gives me an opportunity to be united with my student of many years ago, Dan Breslauer. It's a rather nice thing as one gets to be a more senior faculty member to see your students of years back who show promise.

Now to begin with I need to clarify where the problem of Jewish ethics emerges. I say that and I want to introduce you as gently as I can to what is a sometimes shocking statement until I have had a chance to explain it. The notion of ethics in Judaism appears in the sense in which we contemporaries use it, only about 150 or 175 years ago. Classic Judaism has no ethics *per se*. Ethics as such is not a normal constituent of traditional Judaism. Now that's the shocking statement and let me explain what I mean by it. Part of it is very easy. **The word ethics as such does not occur in the Bible. It does**

not occur in the Talmud. The Biblical authors don't think in terms of a discipline or a way of understanding things called ethics and neither do the rabbis of the Talmud.

And it's fairly clear why they don't. Ethics is a Greek notion. It comes to its major formulation for the first time in the works of Aristotle. Aristotle is part of that marvelous hellenic notion that people ought to think their way through to reality and a sense of duty. **The Bible operates in an entirely different way. God has given the truth through his prophets to God's people.** And these people may then want to think about what God has said, but they are certainly involved in applying it. The categories then that they tend to express this in, that is to say the language of the Bible, is essentially the language of the holy or the sacred.

I am not denying that if one looks with Greek glasses for what Greeks called ethics and one looks then into the Biblical material and the Talmudic material for what corresponds in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages to what Greeks call ethics, one will find statements and strands which are, of course, quite like Greek ethics. One of the astonishing things about the religion of the Bible and the Talmud is the way an extraordinary passion for human beings, not just individually, but collectively as societies and nations, runs through this religion understanding. But it doesn't do so with a separate strand. No book of the Bible is called the book of ethics, like Aristotle has the Nicomachean Ethics. No book of the Talmud or tractate of the Talmud, as we call them is called ethics. Indeed it became somewhat of an embarrassment that there wasn't such a book until the nineteenth century.

I think it is clear that what Greeks called ethics was part and parcel of a larger religious frame which did not separate it out. And that happened only on special occasions later. And it is quite clear what's happened by that time. Jews living in Moslem societies have now come across Greek philosophy through the medium of the Moslem interest in Hellenic culture and the remnants of that philosophy that was known to them. Islam was the instrumentality through which that Hellenic culture once again became part and parcel of the western world, a process in which Jews paid a not-insignificant role in transmitting from Arabic through Jewish sources then on into Latin and the scholasticism of the middle ages. As long as Jews remained interested in philosophy, then, there was some dabbling in what we would call ethics. But it never emerged into a structure or a discipline on its own. It is not then until the nineteenth century that this happens. And that is the tale to which I wish to turn now because it clarifies the problem before us.

The nineteenth century is distinguished in contemporary Jewish studies by the fact that a radical social change takes place in Jewish life. Jews have been segregated and oppressed in European civilization from the time of the Edict Toleration of Constantine by which Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. Jews had not been part of their societies or citizens in any way since states and governments were thoroughly Christian, and because Christendom had no place in it for non-believers, such as Jews. With the

establishment of secular governments of the modern nation, religion becomes primarily a private decision, which the government may encourage or may simply be neutral to. **It is only with this sort of division between religion and government that Jews can become citizens and have full rights with other people in their society.**

When that took place, an extraordinary intellectual challenge presented itself to the Jewish community. And that challenge was two fold. Mind you, you have lived for 1500 years in relative isolation and separation. You have now been allowed to participate with the exception of certain unusual periods in the on-going cultural, intellectual, social, political life of the communities in which you resided. **And now the question was raised "Did the Jewish religion allow you to be part of a general society?" Or was it that the Jewish religion taught that Jews had no place with gentiles. One can see this without too much psychology as a classic case of projection. Having been hated and kept out of society for so long, Jews were now asked, do you really hate non-Jews to such an extent that you are not able on the basis of your Judaism to participate in the society around us? None-the-less, the question was there. And it had to be answered. What was there in Judaism which would allow Jews now to take up this citizenship.**

And at the same time Jews on their own part wondered, as we are modernizing our tradition, as we are now seeking to find ways to participate in the general society, what is there about our tradition which will allow us to do, because of the new social-political possibilities, what our grandparents never did and never could conceive of as part of Jewish life. Well, now we can put the pieces of the puzzle together.

What came at that point as the single most significant answer to these two questions was the answer, ethics, and ethics in a very particular form. For at the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the work of Emmanuel Kant has appeared. Kant revolutionized the notion of ethics in the western mind for all those who were moving with the currents of contemporary thought. There are a few things about what Kant said and their relevance to Judaism that are critical to this discussion. Kant indicated in the first place that every modern rational person would be operating in three distinct yet related realms of mental activity. Science and mathematics (sometimes called logic), ethics and aesthetics. Each of these spheres of mental operation, according to Kant, has a logic and a structure of its own. To be fully modern meant to be rational and therefore to be a person not narrowly involved in science alone but also involved in ethics but not ethics alone and also involved in aesthetics or the broadest kind of culture, but not simply involved with aesthetics in the beautiful alone. You may recognize this as the poet's, the true, the good, and the beautiful. Now these notions gave to ethics a certain very special kind of dignity. For Kant argues and wrote at length to demonstrate that the structure of ethics was rational in the same way that science was rational.

And that meant that it exhibited two fundamen-

tal features which are critical to this discussion. First, it sought to give universal explanations. Explanations which took in every thing in the class. To give us a somewhat simple example, Newton's Law of Gravity would not be very interesting if it applied only to Delicious apples. If one extended it to include Jonathan applies, and Golden Delicious applies, and MacIntoshes that we love in the northeast, it is a little better law. If you include grapes and apricots and peaches and plums, it is more interesting. But what makes it a stunning achievement is, it includes everything. Nothing that has mass is excluded from Newton's Law. Everything that has mass is to be understood by its operations. **That is the principle of universality. And Kant said that is one of the signs of a rational, ethical mind. It operates with a universal inclusiveness.**

That is to say if you have ethics only for Germans, you have a limited ethics. Kant was already able to conceive of the notion of humanity, of the possibility of a world order, of international politics simply because he wanted to include everybody. Now I will just make a comment about the way in which that remains still a radical principle. The notion that no one is to be left out is still what drives many of our ethical impulses, so that, for example, it never occurred to Kant but it seems perfectly obviously today, that if you are going to be inclusive, it shouldn't just be of men, but it ought to be inclusive of women; it shouldn't just be inclusive of white men and white women but people of all races. And now to make perfectly clear why this appealed to Jews. **If the principles of ethics have to be universal, they need to include everyone and therefore that means you can't leave out Jews. Jews thought that Kantian ethics were particularly appealing because of course, they took care of their situation and satisfied that fundamental ethical intuition that Jews were human beings to and were entitled to be treated as human beings.**

There was a second important characteristic of the Kantian understanding of rational ethics. And that was that the rational mind seeks to describe things in terms of law. The scientific mind, to be sure, we are now back at the early nineteenth century, the scientific mind wants to know how things must work. The predictive possibilities of science depend upon the fact that when you come to understand the way something works, the next time these same factors or forces come into being, they *must* eventuate in the same result. Sodium with chlorine under the right circumstances do not have the option to decide to make catsup. They must make salt. Kant said that is the way the mind works in the field of ethics. When one is truly thinking ethically, what one understands oneself rationally to be required to do is to respond to a categorical imperative.

Well, that too was terribly appealing to Jews because it explained something that was very vital to them, namely how they could be modern and at the same time be true to their Judaism. If ethics had to take the form of law, then Jews could now say theirs was the most modern religion for theirs was a religion of law. And now suddenly they had not only validated their religion but clarified what was one of

its chief characteristics that made it so valuable for someone in the modern period. They did this by dint of a certain premise and that premise was very simple—the essence of Judaism is its ethics. To be sure there are many other things in Judaism, but **the heart of the law is its training for people to be decent to one another, to care for one another, to build communities and societies, and indeed through the Messianic vision to build a world order in which justice, peace, security, love and compassion reigned. It was an astounding insight. Everywhere they looked, they were able to find hidden under old observances, ethical insights.**

Passover, the feast of memory in which we remember that we were slaves in the land of Egypt and that we became free, became a glorious celebration of every human being's need to be free, to be removed from tyranny so that they could be true to themselves. The Sabbath which seems like so parochial an activity is an activity which already in the Biblical text calls for the Jewish family which is not working on the Sabbath to extend that Sabbath to its man-servants, and its maid-servants, its oxen, and its asses. Those man-servants and those maid-servants in Canaanite time are not Jewish. That freedom from work is reaching out universally to all human beings who ought to share a certain freedom from work. And it even extends to nature and the beasts of burden.

It was an extraordinary way of re-thinking an old tradition. And what it did was it said to Jews coming into the modern world, the heart of your Jewish obligation is service not just to the Jewish community but to all human kind. In this new modern, social situation what you do for everyone is a fundamental ingredient of your Jewish religious obligation. I do not think you can understand the extraordinary record compiled by Jews in every humanitarian kind of activity in the United States and other countries as well unless you understand this transformation and reinterpretation of the old sense of Jewish duty. There is no field in which Jews have been allowed to participate in which they have not made a greater contribution than their small statistics would warrant. And they have done so on this positive level because they have agreed that ethics is the heart of Jewish responsibility.

I think right down to the present day the overwhelming majority of Jews will tell you if they ask them what Judaism is about that it's essentially for the training of human beings to be decent. If you ever ask most Jews to justify being Jewish, they will almost always do so in the sort of people it produces.

The older Jewish understanding was that ethics had a certain sort of content to it. That what the Bible had in mind for human behavior of a sacred fashion—naturally the sort of ethics that people would have in the modern world. Alas as twentieth century philosophy went along, the high moral idealism of Kant almost completely disappeared. Trying to find a secular ethical theory in our time which *mandates* ethical action, which *requires* ethical activity, which will *validate* the sort of content that was associated with the older Judeo-Christian sense of ethics has become difficult indeed.

I do not mean by that that there are not large

numbers of ethical people around; I mean by that that the theory which supports this kind of ethical activity has become increasingly difficult to find and substantiate. To the contrary, ethics has become very substantially, for certain rational people, an emotional thing, something that one is inclined to do, hardly a basis for a vigorous moral existence. **Or on the other hand, people will tend, these days, to consider ethics only in terms of ones goals. If that's what you want to do, then that's the right way to go about doing it. But why you should have one set of goals or another set of goals has not become clear, and indeed has become quite problematic. I think that lies at the root of much of our social difficulty at the present moment.**

Ethics, in short, has not remained the kind of self-evident clear, qualitative, character-producing activity that it seemed to be in the nineteenth century. Hence the notion that these ethics could be the essence of Judaism has become problematic since it is not clear what ethics are. The other problem has been associated with the word "Jewish." One of the difficulties from the Jewish standpoint of saying that the heart of being Jewish is to be ethical is, one could go ahead and be ethical in a wonderful way and no one would ever know you were Jewish. If the ethics are universal, you're only doing what every other good person should do. Being Jewish in some particularly visible communal, traditional fashion always seems somehow secondary or insignificant. And while that may not have seemed a great problem when the Jewish tradition was very firmly rooted in ages of history and continuity, in our own time as the threats to the continuity of Judaism, and as indeed the preciousness of being a Jew has repeatedly been brought home by the threats to the life of the Jewish community, Jews have become very much more concerned with the continuity and survival of their tradition.

Besides if the ethics no longer come from the society, perhaps then where they need to come from is our religion. As a result of which in a way that one sees through much of western society, and indeed as far across the globe as Iran, there has been a turn to religion as the foundation and basis of the human values that are held dear. So a new opportunity opened up in the Jewish community and that is that instead of thinking of ethics first and interrupting all of Judaism in terms of it, Jews have thought of themselves: perhaps we need to go back to our tradition and see what our tradition can teach us as to how we ought to live. And that has produced the dilemma of contemporary Jewish ethics.

We need our tradition to help us re-establish the ethics we once thought were so certain in the modern world yet when we turn back to our tradition we now discover that there is much in our Jewish tradition which for all its ethical sensitivity and understanding needs somehow to be developed and changed.

And now here is our difficulty. The ethical insight which once seemed so clear in the modern world has begun to vanish and evaporate. We need tradition both to help us give it its ground and at the

same time to direct its content. On the other hand when we turn to our tradition, we discover that there is much in our tradition that needs the insight of contemporary ethics. How shall we put those two together? A problem which as I said is one that affects very many religions in our time. I do not know the answer for other people indeed, I'm not sure I know the answer for the Jewish community but at least I know the direction in which it seems to me we need to go for the answer. With modernity, I believe we need to affirm the rights of the autonomous individual, of the individual to think for him or herself and to try to determine as best that individual can, what the "good" is.

But where Kant thought that was a matter of simple reason and as for most of the last century and a half we thought conscience was the simplest way to find that, I believe that that process of thinking through and deciding for ourselves needs to be put in a religious context. And that religious context has two parts to it. One part which all human beings share, the relationship with God. The self in its intimate relationship to God understands what the ground is which requires it in a way that it might not wish for itself to be an ethical or indeed a holy human being. That does not give it all the answers it needs. It does not relieve it of the struggle to realize day to day what needs to be done. But it does indicate what it is about being a human being and about reality which requires us to be this sort of ethical human being. The other aspect of human existence which qualifies us who are involved in the Jewish community in a religious way is that the relationship we share with God is the relationship which has historically come down to us through the Jewish community.

My individual Jew is situated not just personally, but is situated in the Jewish community and makes his or her decisions in relationship to God in terms of what God wants of that person. He involves others in the community, the past of that community, and in our case, with the extraordinary legal, intellectual religious tradition of that community which serves as a guide as to how one lives in relationship to God. And he also involves a sense of the messianic future to which that community is dedicated.

My Jewish individual in this situation is involved with God as part of the Jewish community but always as an individual making his or her own decisions. That opens the way for a plurality of ways to be Jewish, ways to live from a relationship with God as part of a community. I see that as the fundamental Jewish existential stance: **the covenant.** And if we can learn to see ourselves in the covenant and *accept* the covenant and *live* the covenant then we shall have the insights of modern ethics for the Jewish community and yet carry on in a way which I believe will carry us beyond the dilemma of the contemporary Jewish community.

Rosie Hurwitz is Director of Kansas Audio-Reader Network (a radio reading service for the blind, handicapped and elderly). Serving 10,000 listeners, the Audio-Reader broadcasts to most of Kansas and the Greater Kansas City area. She is national President of the Association of Radio Reading Services. The Hurwitzes live in Lawrence.

REPORT 1984-1985

KSR FUNDING FOR 1984-1985

Religion, a periodic journal of commentary and religion study.

Scholarships for KU students in religious study.

Conferences, outstate and in Lawrence, on relevant popular themes.

High school **Essay Contest** on religion, state wide.

Library acquisitions and staffing for the growing Smith Hall special religion collection.

Visiting Lecturers, the annual KSR Lectureship and other scholarly visitors.

Religion in Public Education, curriculum servicing and maintaining the national office for NCRPE.

Faculty Development, facilitating attendance at professional meetings.

Travelling Faculty, funding presentations by religion faculty to study groups in the state.

These projects are in addition to the provision of the free use of Smith Hall, its furnishings and equipment. This contribution is in cooperation with the Kansas Bible Chair.

HIGHLIGHTS

State Essay Contest for High School Students Winners Announced



Prize winners: l to r; Stephanie Carney, Mrs. Fern Knight, mother of Renee who was ill at banquet time, Jennifer Lassiter.

Winners of the State Religion Essay Contest conducted by the Kansas School of Religion were announced at its annual banquet in Lawrence, April 24. Theme of the 1985 essays was "Religion and Government."

First Place: **Renee Lichelle Knight**, Prairie View High School, Linn County, "Prayer in the Public Schools"

Second Place: **Jennifer J. Lassiter**, Holton High School, Jackson County, "One Nation Under God"

Third Place: **Stephanie D. Carney**, Maranatha Academy, Wyandotte County, "Freedom: Intertwining of Religion and Government"

In announcing the three winners, President Stitt Robinson awarded cash prizes of \$500, \$200, and \$100 respectively.

Essay competition was in two steps: the first within counties, judged by that county clergy group; the second, the state competition of the county winners, judged by the Fellowship of Moses, a support group of the KSR. The contest is planned again for 1986.

Smith Hall Roof Replaced

And again—Irma I. Smith Hall has a new roof! The re-roofing was completed in May. Lloyd Cox is chairman of the Building Committee.

Grants were made this year to six religion students.

Troy Harris	Lawrence
Jean Ireland	Lawrence
John Little	Oklahoma City
Tori Mauslein	Hiawatha
Sharyl McMillian	DeSoto
Frances Zillner	Overland Park

While KU provides the teaching faculty at state expense, the KSR enriches the religion program with distinctive extras, one of which is student scholarships. There is no discrimination in funding these grants.

Board of Governors Being Formed

The KSR Board of Governors, which was phased out in 1978, is being re-established as a committee for testamentary giving.

While the Board of Trustees continues as the policy making group, the new Board of Governors plans to work with the KSR Director, Lynn Taylor, in relating our program to interested individuals.

The Board is still in process of forming.

Remembering Former Deans

Harold Barr, Dean, Kansas School of Religion, and Director, Kansas Bible Chair, 1947-1960, was remembered by many graduates when Smith Hall was built in 1967.

The desk and bookcase used by the former dean have been stored in the building for some years. William Moore, Dean, 1960-1970, also used the furniture.

And now a personal Dean's memorial has now been placed in the Study Center: the desk and case—refinished by gifts from friends.

Contemporary Asian Theologian Address November 10

Dr. Kosuke Koyama of Union Theology Seminary, New York, will deliver the fourth annual Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity. First Christian Church, 1880 Gage Boulevard, Topeka, on behalf of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Council on Christian Unity, will host a special ecumenical service featuring this prominent Eastern teacher November 10, 1985.

Among Koyama's publications are his *Water Buffalo Theology*, and *Three Mile An Hour God*.

This lecture is named for the founder and first president of the Council on Christian Unity, which was created at the Disciples' International Convention in Topeka 75 years ago.

THANK YOU

Burning Bush Society 1984-1985

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Mrs. Carl Rice, Kansas City
Delmar & Claudine Riney, Pratt

Burning Bush continued

Prof. & Mrs. W. Stitt Robinson, Lawrence
Mr. & Mrs. Bob Roth, Larned
Schehrer, Harrod & Bennett, Lawrence
Mr. & Mrs. Todd Seymour, Lawrence
Harriet E. Bunting Shirley, Springfield, MO
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A Way To Extend Your Influence

One opportunity to lengthen your lever for a long time is in a bequest to the Kansas School of Religion. For persons concerned with effective and non-sectarian religious programming, the extension of this concern can be projected by their wills.

There is no such thing as a "religious will." A will is either properly drawn or it is not; that is *why* you consult your lawyer. But a will can reflect some definitely religious ideas and can bring to pass some definitely religious effects.

Your will can:

Distribute your possessions—

When properly prepared by a lawyer, your will dictates your intentions as if you were ordering the giving in person. Few or many—possessions come to everybody; eventually they will be distributed.

Perpetuate your beliefs—

Tactical proof of your faith is made real by the designated purposes in your will. The influence and witness of your faith can continue after you.

Complete your mission—

Some of us did not have the where-with-all to do some things we wished back when our effort and enthusiasm were pointed. Of course, when we leave a legacy (family and other interests having been provided for), we can fulfil some over-arching purposes.

Making a will is an awesome thing. If you are interested in discussing a religious thrust to it, you can call KSR: 913:843-7257.

COMING

Father Drinan Lectures Set for 1986

The KSR Lecturer for 1986 will be Robert Drinan, S.J., Professor of Law, Georgetown University and former member of Congress. Dates for his visit are pending at this writing.

Ordinarily scheduled in April, the KSR Lecture series brings distinguished religious leaders to the campus. Past lecturers have been:

- 1985 Eugene B. Borowitz, Hebrew Union
- 1984 John Macquarrie, Oxford
- 1983 Martin E. Marty, Chicago Divinity
- 1982 William Sloan Coffin, Riverside Church

Four Conferences Out State Scheduled in September & October

"Spiritual and Legal Dimensions of Emergency Health Care" is the subject of this year's state KSR conferences. A cooperative study by clergy, health care practitioners and lawyers, the conferences carry continuing education credit for nurses and clergy. Washburn University is the official credit provider for nurses. KSR certifies CEUs for others.

Conferences scheduled in 1985 are:

- Sept. 20, 21—**Manhattan, First Methodist Church**, Gene Taylor, local chairperson
- Sept. 27, 28—**Great Bend, Barton County College**, Herman Van Arsdale, local chairperson
- Oct. 4, 5 —**Topeka, Washburn University**, Lloyd Munger, local chairperson
- Oct. 18, 19 —**Salina, Kansas Wesleyan**, Eldon Epp, local chairperson

Leaders for the conferences are:

Peg Erickson, RN, MN, Vice president, Nursing,
Central Kansas Medical Center
and
Kenneth E. Peery, LLB, LLM, Executive Director,
Christian Justice Center

General committee for the conferences includes Dr. Alice Young, Steve Fletcher, chairperson, and the KSR Director.

Registrations, as in past years, will be processed by the KSR in Lawrence. Information is coming later, and is also available from:

Kansas School of Religion
1300 Oread
Lawrence, Kansas 66045
(913) 843-7257

Traverse Log



Slippage of the good life and wide spread softening in its values are the subjects of a lot of conversation. Some people smile and some scowl at the baskets filled with reports of lugubrious statistics illustrating how bad things are. The figures may be correct: 50% of children now 5 years old will spend part of their life in a single parent home; some percent of Americans are living below poverty status; the proportion of those who worship is in a falling trend; and high numbers of marriages end in divorce; and so on.

What curdles the cream in the summer kitchen is the expected implication that what is, is right. A hapless reader is supposed to trust the indications that come from this quickie non-logic. If he does not buy it, he is all too often made to look peculiar—somewhat like the town drunk at a reception for the bishop. So the conclusions get firmed up: the family is now a relic; *ad seriatim* mates are in; dull drama is improved by horror scenes; worship is a holdover from a simpler day; whatever—pryomania or liver disease—what is, is. With all the delicacy of battering ram, sophisticated, if doleful, conclusions bombard us.

A friend (I have one, a scientist) explained the Second Law of Thermodynamics. I still do not understand it, but it says something like “all natural systems tend toward a state of minimum energy and maximum disorder.” Kenneth Boulding described it as the natural process of going from bad to worse. Robert Frost sings about it in his “Mending Wall.” Disregarding for now the function of a wall, which Frost decries, we can imagine the two neighbors each spring walking their common stone boundary and replacing the rock that has fallen from the fence during the winter. Is it pixies and elves that tear it down? Neither, it is the Second Law of Thermo. Freeze and thaw and gravity cause the wall to fall down to a state of minimum energy and maximum disorder. The mess is ameliorated by human effort; the neighbors must build it back.

If the Law is allowed to slide on like this unattended into human systems, someday society would be all tumbled down.

But what is, is not necessarily what is meant to be. A building up process evolves from some areas where atrophy, arrogance and intolerance are pronounced in the embalmed “what is.” Some peculiar form should be reaching above the “what is” to the “What can be.” Religion is one of those “can be” areas. Sure, it has some warts and imperfections but at least it acknowledges transcendence, possibly to build up tumbled down systems. Religion is a major social force in human history, common to all societies, it has motivated and shaped human endeavor into impressive development.

Might give it a try.

Frost also wrote 10 years after “Mending Wall” about “. . . miles to go before I sleep and miles to go before I sleep.”

RELIGION

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Kansas School of Religion, 1300
Oread, The University of Kansas,
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Editor, Lynn Taylor

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