

Peace on Earth; An End To Religious Strife  
A New Years Sermon by  
The Rev. Ross Hamilton Henry, Humanist Minister

I am here today to talk about religion and to address the problems that have arisen in the history of our world because of the intolerant side of religion. I address the following questions:

How can we avoid repeating the negative events of the past that religious differences have engendered in our culture? How can people of very different religious views live together peacefully?

We are all familiar with the worst of the historical atrocities associated with religious conflict: The death of Socrates, The Crusades; the inquisition; the abuses of the Aztec Empire and its massive rituals of human sacrifice where thousands were slaughtered to appease what their priesthood declared as their gods thirst for human blood; the Salem witch trials and execution of innocent victims in this country in our own recent past; the extended religious wars in Lebanon in the 70's, 80's and into the 90's that killed thousands; the even more recent Balkan conflict where the Serbs came to power and began to slaughter thousands of their neighbors in a process termed 'ethnic cleansing,' a procedure they learned from their German neighbors to the north during World War Two; the many bloody wars of religion, verses religion, throughout human history all over the globe. Finally culminating in the events of September 11, 2001 with three airliners piloted by religiously motivated Muslim pilots crashing into The World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing almost 3,000 people.

The list of these examples of the dark side of religion and of human nature is voluminous. I could easily fill the entire time we have here this morning with examples like the ones just mentioned.

Religion, that thing that is supposed to calls us to rise to our highest and noblest nature has been responsible for some of the

darkest, bloodiest, most ignoble events in the history of humankind.

If you would know the full depth and breadth of ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ I recommend that you read, *The Third Chimpanzee* by Jared Diamond. In this book Diamond reveals through anthropology and human history the true nature of the third Chimpanzee, which of course is *Homo sapiens*, man “the wise.”

If you read his book, you will be stunned as I was to learn that holocausts did not end with World War 2 and the murder of 11 million Jews, gypsies, communists, and the mentally retarded by a dictator who declared himself to be, god’s agent on earth. It did not end with the defeat of the Nazis. There have been many more genocides since the end of that conflict just over 50 years in our past. Jared Diamond lists 17, two of them were each responsible for the slaughter of more than a million men, women and children. Four more killed over 100,000 each. A graphic illustration from the book shows the extent of those genocides, many of them motivated by religion, others motivated mixtures of religion, politics, and ethnic hatreds.

How is it possible that noble ‘religion,’ the human institution that is supposed to be the source of our morality can lead to such misunderstanding and hatred and the sort of divisiveness among us that leads to such terrible acts of violence. Let us attempt to discover, this morning, what steps can we take to stop the ongoing perpetual cycle of conflict among the various world religions and among the sects within those religions.

We are an increasingly multicultural, multireligious nation. We here in the U.S., even here in Houston, have large minorities of the world’s religions living here side by side. I have met many of them through my involvement with ‘Faiths Together,’ a local inter-religious group founded here in the Woodlands in response to an intolerant action by a few of the members of the local interfaith organization. We at Faiths Together sponsor an inclusive

Thanksgiving celebration every year at one of the member churches. This year it was at St. Anthony of Padua's Catholic Church. I saw many of you there. The Faiths Together group includes Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Humanists, Bahais, Unitarians, Mormons, Presbyterians, Methodists and other Christian churches. It is a truly remarkable Organization.

We must find a way to cope with our religious diversity if we are to survive as a nation. Attending this service each year and supporting this organization is one thing you can do to promote understanding among religions. It is harder to hate if you get to know people and if you sit in pews next to them and share refreshments and conversation with them.

Let us define the word Religion.

From my Scribner's Dictionary:

1. Any system of belief based on revelation and faith.
2. Outward acts of life by which people indicate their faith in god or gods.

From my American College Dictionary (this is the definition that I, as a humanist prefer, because it allows us to be religious even if we don't believe in the supernatural beings.)

- Religion is:
1. The quest for the values of the ideal life.
  2. A particular system in which the quest for the ideal life has been embodied, i.e., the Christian religion, The Buddhist religion, or the Humanist religion (some prefer to call it a philosophy).
  3. Recognition on the part of human beings of a controlling super human power entitled to obedience reverence and worship.

[In my opinion there is a danger in following this definition because it gives fallible humans the authority to speak for a supposed infallible super being and that hubris is at the core of the problem that plagues our world]

There was another definition directly following this one:

### Religionism:

1. Excessive or exaggerated religious zeal.
2. Affected or pretended religious zeal.

In this age, when politics and religion are becoming more and more entangled, I believe that this is what many of our political leaders are practicing today instead of true religion.

The first step we must take toward a solution to the question of how we can peacefully coexist as believers in different religious stories and keep any one powerful religious majority from telling the rest of us how to be religious, is to keep the Jeffersonian wall of separation between church and state firmly in place. We must make sure that the three-part supreme court 'Lemon' test is applied to every law that our legislative bodies pass.

1. The law's purpose must be a secular one
2. It must neither advance nor inhibit religion.
3. It must not involve any sort of entanglement between government and religion.

We do not need laws requiring the prayers of the majority religious sect in our public schools or 2 ton, ten commandment religious icons in our public buildings. We need to keep our government neutral toward all religions favoring none in preference to others in this multicultural nation. I personally believe that forbidding the mixing of government and religion is a rule that all nations should adopt. And I believe that eventually all will see the wisdom of this rule.

Additionally it is my belief that to move toward religious harmony in our country we need to begin to ask the leaders of all religious sects to discontinue teaching the divisive rhetoric that condemns those outside their own religion.

We in the United States were outraged when we heard that the Wahabbi sect of Islam was teaching divisive and hateful doctrines about their non-Islamic neighbors. And yet many of the 'religious' in this nation see nothing wrong with characterizing those who

differ with them as evil and as worthy of sadistic torture for all of eternity.

In my opinion the condemning of nonbelievers to hell is not religion. This may qualify as Religionism but it is not religion.

Tom Paine said: “A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”

True religion does not attempt to make converts by using the tactic of fear.

It is time that we begin to speak out against those who continue to cling to these archaic, culturally backward and hateful doctrines that characterize neighbors of different sects as the enemies of god. There can be no winners in these god contests.

Let us hope that those who preach these divisive doctrines will in time, as Tom Paine hoped, come to realize that this is wrong and destructive to peace on earth in our human societies.

There are fundamentalists extremists in almost all religious sects who practice what I term Religionism and do not practice true religion. True religion is compassionate, open, and tolerant of human imperfection. Religionism insists that it has the one and only true and absolute formula for salvation. And all who do not tow the line are evil and worthy of destruction. This is the sort of thinking that leads to genocides, witch-hunts, religious warfare, and holocausts.

As Professor Bronowski said in one of his television episodes from The Ascent of Man series as he sifted through the ashes of some of his family members who died at Auschwitz: “This is how men behave when they are sure that they are in possession of the absolute truth.”

The near term solution to having different religions get along is eternal vigilance toward protecting the Jeffersonian wall of separation that is now under attack from the new alliance between

the Republican Party and the religious right. We are at a dangerous crossroads in the history of our country. If we are not vigilant our experiment in democracy that has lasted 227 years could be lost along with our religious liberty.

The Templeton prize is an annual cash award of over a million dollars given to the person who is seen as having contributed the most progress toward research or discovery about spiritual realities. Holmes Rolston III was the winner of that prize in 2003.

In his 1988 book *Science and Religion*, Rolston argued that each discipline needed the other lest they both miss the opportunity to be fully insightful and relevant.

He quoted an old religious proverb:

"The religion that is married to science today will be a widow tomorrow."  
And refuted it thus:

"The sciences in their multiple theories and forms come and go. Yes, but science is here to stay," Rolston wrote, "and the religion that is divorced from science today will leave no offspring tomorrow. Religion cannot live without fitting into the intellectual world that is its environment. Here, too, the fittest survive."

I would like to paraphrase some of the words of Chet Raymo as a meditation on how the New Story can inspire us with a truly religious sense of awe before the greatest mystery of all, the mystery of how we and the great wide universe came to be. In my sermon used a visual aid called the Cosmic Journey to help the congregation grasp the immensity of the wonder of this story.

## Chet Raymo and "The New Story:"

Traditional religious faiths have three components:

1. A shared cosmology (a story of the universe and our place in it).
2. Spirituality (a personal response to the unexplained mysteries of the universe)
3. Liturgy (Public expressions of celebrations of community and of life and its significant moments)

The apparent antagonism of science and religion centers almost entirely on cosmology: What is the Universe?  
Where did it come from? How does it work?

What follows is the cosmology of “The New Story,” the humanist cosmology.

Humans have always had answers to these questions. The answers have been embodied in stories—tribal myths, scriptures, and church traditions. All of these stories are derived from the raw experience of wondering about creation. Many of them contain enduring wisdom. But as a reliable cosmological component of religious faith, they have been superseded by what cultural historian and Roman Catholic priest, Thomas Berry, calls "The New Story"—the scientific story of the world.

The New story is the product of thousand of years of human curiosity, observation, experimentation, and creativity. It is an evolving story, not yet finished. Perhaps it will never be finished. It is a story that begins with an explosion from a seed of infinite energy. The seed expands and cools. Particles form, then atoms of hydrogen and helium. Stars and galaxies coalesce from swirling gas. Stars burn and explode, forging heavy elements—carbon, nitrogen, oxygen—and hurl them into space. New stars are formed, with planets made of heavy elements. On one planet near a typical star in a typical galaxy life appears in the form of microscopic self-replicating ensembles of atoms. Life evolves, over billions of years, resulting in ever more complex organisms. Continents move. Seas rise and fall. The atmosphere changes. Millions of species of life appear and become extinct, appear and become extinct. Others adapt, survive, and spill out progeny. At last, the creation event occurs that gives mind to the universe and endows it with the ability to examine itself in awe and

wonder. That creation event is the evolution of human consciousness. After it appears. One species experiences the ineffable (that thing which cannot be expressed in words) and wonders what it means. That species begins to make up stories—of invisible spirits who harbor in darkness, of gods who light up the sky in answer to our prayers—eventually making up—“The New Story.”

The New Story has these important advantages over all the stories that have gone before:

It works. It works so well that it has become the irreplaceable basis of technological civilization. We test the New Story in every way we can. Always and in every way we try to prove the story wrong. When the story fails, we change it.

It is a universal story. Although originally a product of western culture, it has become the story of all educated peoples throughout the world; scientists of all cultures, religions, and political persuasions exchange ideas freely and apply the same criteria of verification and falsification. Like most children I was taught that my ‘old story’—Adam and Eve, angels, miracles, incarnation, heaven, hell and all the rest—was ‘the true story,’ and that all other stories were false. Sometimes our so-called true stories gave us permission to hurt those who lived by other stories.

[Remember the Crusades, The inquisition, the burning of Servetus and Bruno, The persecution of Galileo, The holocausts].

The New Story, by its universality, requires that our individual cultural stories be brought up to date and made to adapt to the new universal interpretation of reality. It helps put the old animosities behind us.



It is a story that asserts our responsibility for our own lives and the future of the planet. In the New Story, no omniscient deity intervenes at will in the creation, answers prayers, or leads all things to a predetermined end. We are on our own in the immensity of creation, with an awesome responsibility to use our talents wisely.

It is a story that reveals a universe of unanticipated complexity, beauty, and dimension. The Order revealed by the New Story is not, that now outdated paltry projection of ourselves who attracted and bedeviled our ancestors. We should treasure our individual ancient stories for the wisdom and values they contain. We should celebrate the creation in whatever poetic language and rituals our traditional cultures have taught us. But only the New Story has the global authority to help us navigate the future. Of all the stories that might provide the cosmological basis of contemporary religious feeling, it is the only one that as had its feet held to the fire of exacting experience.

So let us use the new story to help us navigate into the future. It is a story that has a truly authentic cosmological basis for the religious feeling of awe before the great mystery of being. Let us use it to put aside ancient animosities as we move into a hopeful new chapter of the human race on planet Earth and on whatever new worlds we might eventually colonize.

Just a few days ago on the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth and sir Isaac Newton, spaceships from our planet arrived at mars to investigate that planet as a possible new home for some of our species.

Because we are now a world encompassing species that is poised on the edge of the universe, Let us use ‘The

New Story to begin to heal the brokenness and the hatreds that have arisen in our world because of religious arguments over differences in our various historical mythological cosmologies. Let us leave behind the insistence on requiring literal belief in ancient cosmologies as a requirement that defines who is good and who is evil.

Let us all, here in this nation that Lincoln described as the ‘last best hope of the world’ embrace the ‘New Story’ and, as we have in the past, continue to set an example of tolerance, encouraging our religious neighbors to let go of those negative, condemning, and rejecting elements of religion and finally emerge from the long dark age of the human race into a future where” Religionism” is abandoned and the true religion of the quest for the values for the ideal life for all the people of our planet eventually replaces our provincial sectarian enclaves of ancient belief.

Closing words: He who will not reason is a bigot: fear him. He who cannot reason is a fool: shun his council. He who dares not reason is a slave: Do that which is in your power to free him.

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