

# THE EVIL IN RELIGION

A Service by Fritz Hudson  
Presented September 28, 2003

**Music:** "Chassidic Dance" - Christy & Rusty Banks

## **Chalice Lighting**

*How we danced then, you can't imagine  
my grandmother said. We danced  
till we were dizzy, we danced  
till the room spun like a dreydl,  
we danced ourselves drunk and giddy,  
we danced till we fell panting.*

*We were poor, my grandmother said,  
a few potatoes, some half rotten  
beans, greens from the hedgerow.  
But then on shabbat we ate chicken.  
The candles shone on the golden skin.  
We drank sweet wine and flew up to the ceiling.*

Our Chalice Lighting words this morning come from Marge Piercy, a poet we know. Three of our book's readings are hers. Judaism is her religious tradition. The words are from her poem "On Shabbat She Dances in the Candle Flames"

Most likely Marge's grandmother danced to musicians who played like Christy and Rusty. In Russia, where she was born, they were called Klezmerim: vessels (kleys), of song (zemer) in the Eastern European Jewish language Yiddish.

Adults might remember Rabbi Heschel's words about Shabbat last week: "Sabbath is not an interlude, but the climax of living. It is to be celebrated in all the senses."

Can you think of Klezmer music, like this, as expressing your religion?

Where's Mike DeVall. Will you stand.? Children, do you remember Mike's story about the The Prince Who Thought He Was a Rooster? I'm going to tell the story to our adults today. It was such a powerful story to the artist Marc Chagall, that he made a famous painting to illustrate it, didn't he.

Did Mark tell you that the man who first told the story was a rabbi, leader of his temple as I am of our church? - Rabbi Nachman of Bratlav was his name. It was in his place and time and spirit

that Klezmer music was born. "A holy melody gives strength to the forces of holiness," the Rabbi once said. Klezmer music grew out of his people's prayer music, the prayer music of eastern european jews, formed by the song leaders, the cantors, of their synagogues.

In their spirit, now, let us sing again our opening song, "Shabbat Shalom"

## **Introduction**

*"Eat or don't eat, sleep or don't sleep, pray or don't pray, as long as you're with me on Rosh ha-Shanah."*

These too are Rabbi Nachman's words to his followers. To gather round at this beginning of the year time, to enter together into the spirit of the Days of Awe together, may be the single most essential expression of faith in this tradition.

It is the time to question oneself and all one has done, to find the harm of our past acts, and to set about immediately to remove as much of that harm as we can. In this spirit this morning I will us to examine the harm engendered within and among us by religion itself - to look squarely at "the evil in religion." And then I hope we'll consider how we might be called to mitigate to root out that evil, to prevent the harm from continuing, as quickly as possible, so that all humanity may be more firmly inscribed in what Jews call "The Book of Life."

Rabbi Nachman's story "The Prince Who Thought He Was a Rooster," I think, might point us along that way. So let me share it with you first, as Mike is sharing it with our children. Then after some more music in the spirit of Nachman's klezmerim, surrounding our work as a community of spirit, I will return to try to transport its lesson from his time to ours.

*Once there was a prince who fell into the delusion of thinking he was a rooster. He took off all his clothes, sat under the table, and refused to eat any food but corn seeds. The king sent for many doctors and many specialists, but none of them could cure him.*

*Finally a wise man appeared before the king, and said: "I think I can cure the prince." The king gave him permissions to try.*

*The wise man took off his clothes, crawled under the table and began to munch on corn seeds. The prince looked at him suspiciously, and said: "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"*

*The wise man answered: "Who are you and what are you doing here?"*

*"I am a rooster," answered the prince belligerently.*

*"Oh really? So am I," answered the wise man quietly.*

*The two of them sat together under the table until they became accustomed to each other. When the wise man felt that the prince was used to his presence, he signaled for some clothing. He put on the clothing, and then he said to the prince: "Don't think that roosters can't wear clothing if they want to. A rooster can wear clothes and be a perfectly good rooster just the same."*

*The prince thought about this for a while, and then he too agreed to put on clothes.*

*After a time, the wise man signaled to have some food put under the table. The prince became alarmed and said: "What are you doing?" The wise man reassured him. "Don't be upset. A rooster can eat the food that human beings eat if he wants to, and still be a good rooster." The prince considered this statement for a time, and then he too signaled for food.*

*Then the wise man said to the prince: "Do you think that a rooster has to sit under the table all the time? A rooster can get up and walk around if he wants to and still be a good rooster." The prince considered these words for a time, and then he followed the wise man up from the table, and began to walk.*

*After he began dressing like a person, eating like a person, and walking like a person, he gradually recovered his senses and began to behave like a person.*

How would such a wise person, a *tzaddik* in Yiddish, approach the sickness of our time?

**Music:** "Let's Be Cheerful, Said the Rabbi"

- Christy & Rusty Banks

### **Sermon**

*Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep! Rouse yourselves, you slumberers, out of your slumber! Examine your deeds ... you who are caught up in the daily round, losing sight of eternal truth; you who are wasting your years in vain pursuits that neither profit nor save. Look closely at yourselves; improve your ways and your deeds. Abandon your evil ways. (Gates of Repentance p.209)*

Right after these words are said at the temple at Rosh Hashanah, the shofar, the ram's horn predecessor of Christy's clarinet I suppose, sounds its long bending notes.

Rabbi Nachman said that "The blasts of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah revitalize the soul and intelligence of every Jew. Each one receives a new soul and a new level of understanding."

I'm hoping we can seek a new level of understanding, together here today. I'm hoping we can come to a new level of understanding of the tragedy of religion, how humanity's ancient endeavor

to find the truth of life and empower its creativity at times so clearly promotes falsehood and leads to its destruction. I'm hoping we can somehow receive a new soul, a new power to live beyond ourselves freed from these forms of religion.

Marge Piercy names the tragedy I suspect we all see.  
(*The Art of Blessing the Day*. 122.)

*The Christian right, Islamic Jihad,  
the Jewish Right Bank settlers bringing  
the Messiah down, the Japanese sects  
who worship by bombing subways,  
they all hate each other  
but more they hate the mundane,  
ordinary people who love living  
more than dying in radiant glory,  
who shuffle and sigh and bake bread.*

This is the beginning of her poem "The Fundamental Truth."

Charles Kimball sees the tragedy in its fullness, I think. "Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truth. At the same time, ... more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force. (1) ... The horrible toll of religious bigotry or destructive theological certainty no longer has predictable or defined geographical limits. (26) ... The tragic events of September 11, 2001 (simply) underscore the point. (1) ... Unlike generations that have gone before us, the consequences today of corrupted religion are both dire and global. (39)

These words are from Kimball's recent book *When Religion Becomes Evil*. Out of his experience now as professor of comparative religions at Wake Forest University, and formerly as Director of the Middle East Office for the National Council of Churches and religious mediator in Iran during the U.S. hostage crisis there, he asks what in our approach to religion seeds this tragedy and how might we back away from it.

"When you are standing on the edge of a cliff, progress is not defined as one step forward. ... We'd better take a few steps back," Kimball says.(7) Then he suggests how those steps might be taken, how to reverse the developments in religion that have seeded our tragedy.

The first step backward he sees before us is the step to purge from religion its tortured support for "holy warfare." "(A)t the center of authentic religion one always finds the promise of peace, both an inner peace for the adherent and a requirement to seek peaceful coexistence with the rest of creation," Kimball writes. Christianity's adoption by the Roman Empire, from the fourth century onward, spawned its drawn-out development of a "just war doctrine." Islam's birth as a

claim for political control of the Arabic peninsula found a place for carefully limited warfare into its founding inspiration. "The nature of modern weapons and the dangerous ways regional conflicts can ignite a wider conflagration," now render these attempts inapplicable and corrupting, Kimball writes. (183) "While there are legitimate bases for collective military action in the community of nations, an appeal to religion is not one of them." 156 In Islam's hadith, Mohammed subsumed holy war as the "lesser jihad" as compared to the "greater jihad" of the struggle for self-control. "In 1066 the soldiers who fought at Hastings had to do penance for their slaughter, on the first Crusade (which began in 1095) the slaughter itself was considered a penitential act. (The Crusades British Broadcasting Corporation. 1995) Our step back from the edge begins in returning to these higher grounds.

A second step back Kimball maps out is the step away from pursuits of an ideal time or state. "Challenging government and societal structures seen as unjust and oppressive is a valid, if not imperative, feature in most religious traditions," he writes (123). The ancient Jewish prophets are its model. The pursuers of "Islamic republics" or a "Christian America," in our time, however, sow the seeds of intractable conflict and corrupt the founding inspiration of their faiths. Israel's legitimacy as a theocracy can only have a limited life, a correction aberration in the necessary separation of religious from political power. "Those who narrowly define ideal temporal structures of the state and determine that they are God's agents to establish a theocracy are dangerous." (124). A return to the prophets' model is the step back to health.

A third step back, then, moves into removing the preconditions for dangerous political religiosity, to addressing its psychological underpinnings. Religion's "impulse to nurture and educate the faithful with minimal interference from outside is common and understandable," Kimball writes. But "The potential for serious problems escalates proportionately in relation to how detached the group is from the surrounding society and how effectively it holds its own leaders accountable to ethical guidelines. (92) ... The more the power and authority are focused in one or a few people, the higher the likelihood of abuse. (94) The contrast between constructively and destructively charismatic leadership in our time has been modeled on the one side by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr and on the other by Jim Jones of the People's Temple kool-aid suicides and Asahara Shoko of Aum Shrinrikyo's sarin subway murders. A step back to any of the inspiring originators of our world's faiths, to Mohammed, Jesus, Buddha, will find the model for leadership which encourages questions, which seeks seeking faith in open dialogue, while affirming the ultimate responsibility of individuals for their own behavior. All religious movement away from that model toward limiting the intellectual freedom and individual integrity of its adherents has set the preconditions for our current tragedies. (72)

The last step back cuts at the core of religion as many of us have experienced it. It is the step back from religion's intrinsic grasp for absolute truth. "Invariably, religious truth claims are based on authoritative teachings of 'inspired' or sagelike charismatic leaders or on interpretations of sacred texts, often connected to such leaders," Kimball writes. "However, when particular interpretations of these (truth) claims become propositions requiring uniform assent and are treated as rigid doctrines, ... such tendencies are the first harbingers of ... evil. Understanding that

every religious tradition has elements that tend toward such rigidity and exposing (their) dangers ... are vital steps in bringing to light healthy alternatives." (41)

Osama bin Laden's rigid interpretation of Quranic texts which laud martyrdom to recruit suicide bombers is only our most horrifying current expression of this tendency. The Rev. Paul Hill's rigid interpretation of Christian biblical passages to justify murdering abortion clinic workers is exported overseas by our media. Meanwhile the medieval Japanese monk Nichiren's declaration that anyone who kills those who slander the Buddha's Dharma will not suffer the normal consequences of karma, laps up on our shores with the arrival of the Soka Gakkai movement. (52)

Yet, Kimball writes, "If all religions are not the same, neither is it the case that all religious worldviews are equally valid." (25). And in this necessary step, he says, the Jews have a gift to share. "While Jews are not exempt from the trap of rigidly defining absolute truth claims about sacred texts, a long history of learned and critical inquiry diminishes the dangerous inclination. (60) Professor Robert Alter chimes that for the ancient Hebrew writers, "Meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a *process*, requiring continual revision - both in the ordinary sense and in the etymological sense of seeing-again -- continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in information provided. (The Art of Biblical Narrative 1981 p.12). A return to their approach to truth is the final step back healthy religious development requires.

Contemplating the proponents of "The Fundamental Truth," in her poem, Marge Piercy cries. (The Art of Blessing the Day. 122.)

*They need a planet of their own,  
perhaps even a barren moon  
with artificial atmosphere,  
where they will surely be nearer  
to their gods and their fiercest  
enemies, where they can kill  
to their heart's peace  
kill to the last standing man  
and leave the rest of us be.*

We can share her desire, but we can't invest our hope in its realization.

Professor Kimball quotes one of the professors we shared as students at Harvard, Harvey Cox, to say that "As time-bound creatures, we must work with the stubborn stuff of past and present. Among the "givens" are our existing religious traditions, which, far from dying out, appear to be leaping into a period of resurgence. (We cannot (wait) for kismet to deliver us into a new era in which we no longer need to project our inmost terrors onto the heavens or onto other people or nations." (Many Mansions 1988 p.212) "Whether one is a true believer or a die-hard secularist,

it remains necessary to take the next step from the knowledge of these factors that predict when religion becomes evil to a clear understanding of how religion can remain true to its authentic sources and a force for positive change. (Kimball, 187)

When Muslims and Hindus in her home state of Gujarat fell to murdering each other over whether an ancient mosque would be replaced with a new temple to Ram, Shabana Azmi, an actress, a senator, and a 'cultural Muslim, proclaimed that "Tolerant people should stop acting as cannon fodder for wily politicians. The mistake the liberal seculars made [in India] was that by not occupying any religious space, they allowed religious extremists to occupy it all. It is too dangerous to leave religion in the hands of zealots, particularly after September 11." (Quoted in Washington Post 11/08/02)

Our model, I think, is Rabbi Nachman's wise man. The only cure for his prince's departure from humanity was first to share his world on his own terms. For us, the only cure for religion's departures from health is for the rest of us to claim our common identity as religious people, and then, like the wise man, to seek to stretch unhealthy religion's understanding of itself back across its self-imposed separation from humanity.

As Charles Kimball, writes, "Human beings are fully human only when ... they recognize that all people have more in common than they have in conflict, and that it is precisely when what they have in conflict seems most overriding that what they have in common needs most to be affirmed." (199)

*No task is ever completed,*  
says Marge Piercy (The Art of Blessing the Day. 94.)  
*No task is ever completed,*  
*only abandoned or pressed into use.*  
*Tinkering can be a form of prayer.*

*Twenty-six botched worlds preceded*  
*Genesis we are told in ancient commentary,*  
*and ha-Shem said not only,*

*of this particular attempt,*  
*It is good, but muttered,*  
*if only it will hold.*

### **Chalice Extinguishing**

*The moon is dark tonight, a new*  
*moon for a new year. It is*  
*hollow and hungers to be full.*

*It is the black zero of beginning.*

*Now you must void yourself  
of injuries, insults, incursions.  
Go with empty hands to those  
you have hurt and make amends.*

*It is not too late. It is early  
and about to grow. Now  
is the time to do what you  
know you must and have feared*

*to begin.*

Marge Piercy (The Art of Blessing the Day. 148)