The "Nones" and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Emor

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Emor
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Several years ago, Professor Daniel C. Dennett of Tufts University published an article, “Why the Future of Religion is Bleak.” He argued that religious institutions have survived historically by controlling what their adherents know, but today that is next to impossible. He pointed out that the influence of religion has been waning, especially in Europe and North America. In the United States, one out of six Americans identifies as a “None,” a person without a religious affiliation. And the number of Nones is on the increase.

Bad news: Professor Dennett is right. The number of “Nones” in the world has grown rapidly during the past several decades.

Good news: Professor Dennett is wrong. The future of religion is not at all bleak. Human beings are spiritual beings, seeking transcendence and cosmic understanding. Even those who list themselves as “Nones” are generally not devoid of spiritual aspirations. They simply are not finding that their aspirations are being fulfilled within “establishment” religious contexts.

As people become more educated and as they depend less on clergy for information and truth, it is inevitable that there will be a change in how they approach religion. Among highly educated individuals whose minds have been shaped by secular universities and culture, there is surely a greater emphasis on self-reliance and individualism. There is a greater weight given to science than to metaphysics. There is less internal pressure to affiliate with a religious institution. The “Nones” are a natural result of an increasingly secular, science-based, and individualistic society.

Compounding the problem of current-day religion is the “success” of fundamentalism and authoritarianism within religious institutions. The more extreme groups in Judaism, Christianity and Islam are flourishing. Whereas the

“Nones” choose to have few or no children, the “right wing” religionists have lots of children. Whereas the “Nones” are content to disconnect themselves from bastions of religious life, the “right wing” religionists flock to their religious centers. Whereas the “Nones” tend to rely on their own ability to make judgments, the “right wing” religionists line up behind charismatic and authoritarian religious figures.

If the future of religion is indeed problematic, it is not because of the increase of “Nones” but because of the root causes that drive thinking people away from religion. Too often, religion is identified with ignorance, superstition, and subservience to all-powerful authorities.

The hope for religion is the growth of religious institutions that actually take their parishioners seriously, that don’t insult their intelligence, that speak to their spiritual needs. Educated people are not—or should not be—looking for a religion that depends on ignorance and subservience, or that fosters superstitious beliefs and practices. Serious people seek meaningful religious experience, not entertainment or commercialism, or vapid pontifications.

Fortunately, there are vibrant communities of highly educated, highly individualistic people who find great strength and happiness in their religious institutions and in their communities.

In this week’s Torah portion we read: “And you shall keep My commandments and do them: I am the Lord. And you shall not profane My holy name; but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel; I am the Lord who hallows you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the Lord” (Vayikra 22:31-33).

In this passage, we read of the aspiration of living a holy, upright life; of avoiding behavior that profanes God’s name. We are to live in a manner that reflects sanctity and spirituality, righteousness and goodness. But what do these things have to do with the fact that God took us out of the land of Egypt? Why is that fact included in the admonition to live a holy life?

The 16th century sage, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, was among those who pointed out that the name of Egypt, “mitsrayim,” is related to the word “tsar,” narrow, constricted. The Torah’s frequent mention of our Exodus from Egypt is a reminder for us to leave the narrowness and constriction of the enslaved lives we led while we were in ancient Egypt. The Exodus not only brought physical freedom, but also psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual freedom.

The commandment to be holy is not intended to stifle us, but to expand our horizons. We are to feel the liberation that comes with overcoming physical and psychological constraints. The Torah offers a religious vision which expands our lives, not one that constricts our lives. A religious personality lives in relationship with an Eternal God.

When religion is identified with ignorance, superstition, authoritarianism and commercialism, then it is no surprise that thinking people will be repelled by it. But when religion fulfills its true mission of elevating our souls and sanctifying our lives, then it is at the very source of human happiness and fulfillment.

Angel for Shabbat