

RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING: DOES IT MATTER AND, IF SO, WHAT MATTERS?

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In this second lecture I want to shift emphasis from the broader culture to the more immediate context in which youth ministry takes place, namely, the church. And I want to start with the admittedly risky proposition that one thing the church must do—no matter what else it does—is to minister to the young people who are growing up in the church. Now, the reason this is a risky proposition is that a critic could come along and say, yes, but just how many young people are likely to be raised in the church, and what about all the others who are not? How can the church draw them in and meet their needs? Or, for that matter, what about the young people whose families attend church only sporadically? How can we encourage them to be more active? Well, I'm going to pretty much ignore all those folks today. After all, there are some families left in our world who are making a serious effort to train their children religiously, and it is those young people I want to emphasize.

Let me begin by putting religious socialization in the context of what we know about it from recent national statistics. One survey found that 77 percent of working Americans had been sent to Sunday school as children, and that 61 percent had been reared in families that said grace at meals. Yet it is also evident that growing up religious is an intense experience that sets some Americans apart from the majority who are merely exposed in small doses to religion. In one survey, 48 percent of working Americans said religion had been "very important" in their families while they were growing up; in the same study, only 24 percent said they were raised in homes where family devotions were a regular part of daily life. And if more specific combinations of religious activity are considered, the number of people who were raised religious again appears to be a minority; for instance, only 28 percent of working Americans say their parents were very religious and read the Bible to them as children. Just to emphasize this point, then, the vast majority of people are probably exposed to page 78 some kind of religious upbringing, but perhaps no more than a quarter are raised in families that provide a fairly intense form of religious socialization.

The possibility that religious upbringing is declining is evident, too. For example, this is suggested by the results of a survey conducted among women in Muncie, Indiana, in 1924: 69 percent said their own mothers had taught them loyalty to the church, and 50 percent said they

were teaching this value to their own children. Another study, more than a half century later, helped put these findings in perspective. In that study (conducted in 1978), only 35 percent of mothers said they had been taught loyalty to the church, and only 22 percent said they were teaching it to their children.

At present, most teenagers are still involved to some extent with churches, but we can also ask how intensive their religious training may be. The best national evidence on religious belief among teenagers demonstrates that it is widespread but ill-defined, impersonal, and seldom put into practice. Virtually all teenagers believe in the existence of God, yet fewer than a third feel they have ever experienced the presence of God, and not many more than this pray, read the Bible, are able to correctly name the four Gospels, regard their religious beliefs as being important, or believe religion can answer today's problems. Teenagers, it appears, buy into the adult mythology of American culture that says religion is something that respectable people should practice (three quarters say regular church attendance is a mark of citizenship, for example). In their own hierarchy of values, however, religious faith generally falls much lower than such virtues as hard work, self respect, and independence. Another telling indication is the amount of trust young people place in religious organizations. While this trust is still high relative to many other organizations (especially government), it has slipped well behind that expressed toward secular organizations concerned with humanitarian causes. For example, nearly twice as many young people express a great deal of confidence in environmental organizations as do in religious organizations. Young people are, on the whole, unwilling to dismiss religion out of hand (only two in ten, for instance, say that religious beliefs are simply unimportant), but they are quite willing to concede that religion is less important to them personally than it is to their parents and grandparents.

Controversy exists, of course, over the question of whether it is good or bad for young people to be given an intense dose of religion while they are growing up. On the one hand, church leaders (not to mention the press) raise doubts about the effectiveness of religious upbringing, pointing to cases where someone who was raised religious grew up to be a mass murderer and to other cases where an adult experience of grace was far more important than the childhood trauma of attending Sunday school every week. On the other hand, most church leaders, not to mention many parents, feel they have some responsibility to pass an understanding of the faith on to the next generation.

The relevance of religious upbringing to adult religious behavior is [page 79] easy to establish in statistical studies. Those who grew up in religious homes are much more likely to participate in religious organizations as adults than those who were raised in less religious homes. For instance, in the study of working Americans I referred to earlier, 57 percent of those whose parents had experienced family devotions while growing up currently attended religious services every week, compared with only 30 percent of those who had not experienced family devotions. Similar differences were evident for other kinds of religious training. For example, 47 percent of those whose parents had read the Bible to them now attended church weekly, compared with 27 percent of those whose parents had not done this. The subjective impression that religion was important also made a difference: 48 percent attended church weekly among those who said religion was very important in their family of origin, compared with 26 percent of those who said it was somewhat important, and 24 percent of those who said it was not very important.

With statistical evidence, it is also possible to sort out the kinds of religious socialization that may have the strongest consequences for the behavior of adults. It might be expected that attendance at religious services as an adult would be influenced most strongly by participating in a religious organization as a child, and to some extent this is true. People who were sent to Sunday school as children attend services more often as adults than those who were not sent. Yet it is religious training in the home that appears to matter most: family devotions as a child is the best predictor of adult attendance, followed by seeing one's parents read the Bible at home, and after that, by parents having read the Bible to the child. Saying table grace has a relatively weak effect on adult attendance, as does being sent to Sunday school.

If religious leaders are interested in preserving their own institutions, they certainly must be interested in the religious upbringing of children. While it is true that adult converts are often important to the revitalization of churches, most church members are there today because they experienced something of the church while they were growing up. In fact, in the previous study, only one regular churchgoer in nine came from a family in which religion was not very important, while two in three came from a family in which religion was very important.

Boring as they may be, such statistics give urgency to the question of youth ministry. Unless churches continue to draw in young people, give them primary experiences of the faith, and support families in their efforts to train children, the churches can count on significant shrinkage in their members and contributors.

But I want to connect this lecture to what I said earlier about the changes taking place in our society. As social conditions change, Christian education must also change. To make this point more concretely, I'd like to focus on a specific example, a person who illustrates one mode of religious upbringing, and then contrast that person with another one who illustrates page 80 some of the changes. My example is a man I'll call Lee Ackerman, one of the people we've interviewed as part of a research project.

Lee Ackerman is a retired carpenter approaching his seventieth birthday, a man with thinning gray hair who wears glasses and is dressed in gray trousers and a plaid shirt. As he reflects on what it has meant to be a person of faith, he is drawn to an image that leaps to his mind's eye as one of his earliest memories. It is of walking home from church on a sunny Sunday afternoon in the fall, stopping at his grandfather's house, and being given a brittle piece of black licorice. As he reflects on this scene, he is able to articulate other features of it that linger in his memory. The road down which he has been walking is called Ackerman Road; it is named after his grandfather's farm. The church from which he has come is a small wooden structure, nearly square, with white stucco exterior walls, and on the inside are four rows of wooden pews facing a pulpit about ten feet long, in front of which is a wooden desk that holds papers used by the Sunday school superintendent. Lee remarks, although it was not part of his earliest memory, that the people who built the church early in this century paid \$700 for the materials—and wondered how they could raise such a huge sum of money. He knows, too, from having walked the road so many times, that the distance from the church, past his grandfather's farm, to his own house is exactly half a mile. Just beyond is where the Hollises lived, and over yonder, on the other side of the church, is where the Midlers lived with their five children, one who later married the Hollis boy, with whom he often sat on those long Sunday mornings on the hard wooden pew.

Lee Ackerman dates his personal encounter with spirituality a few years after this. The church invited an itinerant evangelist each year to hold a series of revival meetings, and when Lee was nine, the evangelist was the Reverend Ian H. Bean, who came and preached for two weeks, during which he stayed in the Ackerman's spare bedroom, since they lived so close to the church. Toward the end of this fortnight, Lee decided to "accept Christ" and was baptized in the stream that ran down behind the church and through the back of his grandfather's farm. He says, "That's the thing that sticks out in my mind as the most vividly real."

It is unclear from Lee Ackerman's comment whether accepting Christ or being baptized in the stream stands out as "most vividly real" in his memory. In fact, the two are intertwined, just as his sense of spirituality is almost imperceptibly interwoven with his rootedness in this place. The stream in which he was baptized had been in the family for three generations and is now owned by one of his cousins. The people who attended the church lived nearby, forming a community of friends and relatives. The pastor, Benjamin Hottle, was a layman, or "free minister," as the people called him, who gave sermons and presided over meetings, but earned his living as a farmer. Sometimes he took turns with Lee's grandfather, who was also a free minister. The Midlers were all related to Benjamin Hottle. So were the three Funk girls, who taught Lee's Sunday school class. There were page 81 also two large families of Kramers in the church.

As Lee Ackerman talks about his spirituality, he uses the words "Christ" and "church" almost interchangeably, and he places both in a spatial context. "Christ was supposed to be the center of our lives," he asserts, and when asked to explain, he says, "The church was the center of our lives. Our life revolved around the church. Going to church was the most important thing for us to do." Noting that there were no Little League teams in those days, and that the church discouraged going to movies and dances, he says his family's "social life" focused mainly on the church. The annual church picnic, he recalls, was "the highlight of the year."

The Ackerman home was an extension of the church, an important segment of the sacred space in which Lee Ackerman came to understand spirituality. Besides the Reverend Bean, most of the other evangelists and traveling ministers stayed there: George Landis, A. C. Bauer, Joe Whittaker. Lee remembers them well. Whittaker was the one who always ate with his plate precariously close to the edge of the table. Bauer went out in the mornings and chopped wood for exercise. Landis played the saxophone and the guitar. They'd sit around after supper and tell stories until bedtime.

The home was a sacred space for Lee Ackerman in other ways, too. Every morning before he left for school, his parents called him and his three siblings to the dining room for Bible reading and prayer. Usually, the children would take turns reading. At every meal, his father said a prayer and in the evening Lee said a prayer before going to bed. Lee learned early that God was always watching him, so it didn't make any sense to do something and try to hide it. He says that disobeying his parents and disobeying God were "one and the same thing." He also memorized verses, proudly displaying a plaque on his bedroom wall that he received for memorizing a certain number of them. He also was fond of the picture on the dining room wall showing Jesus talking to some children.

Anyone familiar enough with a particular religious tradition to play what insiders call "the name game" will recognize that Lee Ackerman grew up in the Church of the Brethren, and they will thus know that his experience was typical of many people raised in this tradition. The relatively small size of congregations, distinctive customs (such as love feasts and foot washings), kin networks, pacifism, and social taboos enhanced the likelihood that spirituality and place would be strongly associated. Carl Bowman, in his recent study of the Brethren, argues that the denomination has experienced a profound cultural transformation in the twentieth century; yet it is instructive that he uses the imagery of a house to describe the church, and it is fitting that the denomination still regards itself as a family, especially when four out of every five members are still related by blood or by marriage.

In this regard, Lee Ackerman is not at all typical of most Americans. Sociologists would argue that he grew up in a sect that quite purposely drew boundaries around itself, creating a sacred space within by defining page 82 the rest of the world as profane. It is true that relatively few of his generation would have been baptized in the creek on their grandfathers' farms, and yet the sense of sacred space that is part of his religious identity was, I believe, more common than has generally been understood. To be sure, Americans have always emphasized the distinction between the Creator and the creation, and have recognized the transcendence of God as much or more as God's immanence, certainly to the point of denying that the sacred actually lives in houses or trees or automobiles. Nevertheless, it is also true that Americans have understood their land to be consecrated territory, hallowed by sacred blood and sacralized by a divine covenant between God and the nation's founders. They have built houses of worship in great profusion and called on believers to treat these places with reverence, doing God's work there, feeling closer to God there, and perhaps even feeling that one's prayers were more likely to be answered there. Indeed, it could reasonably be argued that American history, from the standpoint of the Europeans who took over the continent from its indigenous peoples, was largely a process of extending control over territory and of demarcating portions of this territory as sacred space. This was a process that probably reached its apex during the 1950s, when church membership grew to an all-time high as a percentage of the American public, when church attendance also peaked, when anticommunism reinforced an American civil religion, when the slogan "In God We Trust" first appeared on the nation's currency, and when the postwar baby boom focused unprecedented attention on the family, the home, and the religious aspects of good parenting.

Lee Ackerman is by no means alone in fashioning his story of spiritual formation around a specific place and in spending much of his life finding God within that space. He is similar to a Jewish man, the son of Russian immigrants, who describes the neighborhood in which he grew up in the United States as a kind of shtetl, defined by turf wars with Catholics on one side and Protestants on the other side, and who verges on tears as he mourns the world he has lost. Lee Ackerman is similar to a Catholic woman who talks about her life in the 1950s in terms of the parish in which she lived and then the next parish to which she moved. In her case, the sacred was defined by the neighborhood, the short walk to the church, the fellow parishioners who lived nearby, the crucifix on her bedroom wall, and saying the novenas with her mother every evening at bedtime. Others from the same era describe their church as a home away from home, tell how their parents were known in the community by which church they attended, describe ethnic and racial tensions that overlapped with their religious identity, and tell stories about family gatherings, wall hangings, Bibles, and other objects that defined the home or the neighborhood

as a sacred space. All of them lived in a sacred community that exerted a "centripetal force," in writer Wendell Berry's words, capable of "holding local soil and local memory in place."

Without being reductionistic about it, it is easy to identify the social [page 83] conditions that reinforced these images of the sacred. High-speed transportation and mass communication were relatively less available then than now, neighborhoods embraced a relatively larger scope of life than the bedroom communities in which people now reside, ethnicity and religion often overlapped and did so in specific geographic locations, the Victorian ideal of the domestic middle-class home was finally within economic reach of the vast majority of Americans, high fertility rates and low levels of female participation in the paid labor force directed attention at family life, the Cold War provided an external threat to the nation, and, above all, the churches and synagogues managed to gain a virtual monopoly over the religious life of Americans, providing the only places in which to express spirituality, other than the occasional faith healer, psychic, or astrologer.

In comparison, the decades since the 1950s have been times of greater fluidity in all these social conditions; indeed, the changes have become so much a part of ordinary life that it is worth reviewing some of them to understand their collective importance. People move from community to community more often now than they did in the 1950s, and they can travel to visit friends and relatives some distance away more easily or contact these people more often by telephone, meaning that social relationships have not diminished as greatly as some have feared; but primary relationships have decidedly shifted, as Claude Fischer has emphasized, from neighborhoods to networks. Information comes directly from all over the world and in such abundance that people are forced to shop for the information they wish to receive, spending more time browsing in bookstores, flipping through cable channels, and surfing the internet, rather than simply assimilating the information closest at hand. If the American economy has always been dominated by market relations, these relations are now more pervasive, entering family rooms and bedrooms through home shopping channels, drawing children into the consumer culture at an early age, and employing a majority rather than a minority of American women. The negotiation that at one time may have consisted of haggling with the butcher over a cut of meat now focuses less on a person you know than on negotiating with oneself about which market to enter, which advertisements to believe, and where to go next. Local religious organizations have adapted to this situation by offering a greater variety of goods and services to prospective clienteles, sometimes creating mall-style megachurches that encourage the whole family to shop at one place (but to shop, nevertheless). Even the most successful congregations are now embedded in a much more complex market of spiritual vendors, including New Age, recovery, and inspiration sections in superstores run by national book companies, the various offerings on cable television, retreat centers, Alcoholics Anonymous groups, religious studies courses, and holistic health seminars.

An example that illustrates the more diverse spirituality of process that is coming to characterize an increasing number of Americans is provided by a woman in her mid-forties whom I'll call Shirley Knight. When [page 84] asked to give her religious preference, she says "esoteric Christianity" (and she does not mean that she belongs to an esoteric denomination such as the Church of the Brethren). Shirley Knight is typical of many middle-class Americans and, although she is a member of the baby boomer generation, her experiences must be understood in

the context of wider changes taking place in American society, rather than simply in terms of a generational explanation. Her father was a lawyer, providing his family with a comfortable lifestyle in the suburbs of a large city. When Shirley was seven, her parents divorced, and she lived with her father until she was nine, and after that with her mother. Shirley describes her father as an altruistic, idealistic man who was searching for something while she was growing up, and her mother as a woman who was more interested in spirituality than in church. When she was little, her parents used to take her to church every Sunday, although it was generally a different church each Sunday. They thought it was important for her "to explore what was out there." In fourth grade, she attended a Catholic boarding school, and in fifth grade, a private school run by Quakers. In sixth grade, she went through confirmation class at an Episcopal church, and in seventh and eighth grades attended Sunday school at the Methodist church. During high school, she mostly attended Sunday school at the Christian Science church.

Shirley's journey continued when she went away to college at a large state university. Among the first people she met were some students who were active in the Campus Crusade for Christ. She was attracted to it and participated for awhile, but says that "something held me back" She started participating in the Catholic Student Union, finding herself attracted "to the ritual and the beauty of Catholicism, more than to Protestant simplicity." Her interest in Catholicism and in spirituality deepened during her sophomore year, which she spent studying abroad in Italy. During her junior year, she took a course in religion that exposed her to Buddhism, which she thoroughly enjoyed. After graduation, she moved in with her boyfriend and took a job to pay off her loans and to buy time while she decided what career to pursue. She says her boyfriend was "into yoga and very spiritual," but it seemed "too mystical" to her, like he was just floating, rather than being connected to earth. Within a year she had broken up with him. She had also worked at seven different jobs.

One day she was sitting at work feeling sorry for herself, thinking, as she recalls, that "nothing is working for me," when a new customer walked in and struck up a conversation. Shirley married him two weeks later. He had been deeply involved in Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step groups and was currently interested in Sufism. Shirley says, "I'd always been seeking a spiritual path, too." So they spent their honeymoon touring retreat centers and communes in Europe. Coming home disappointed that they had found nothing exactly to their liking, they settled in Virginia and became more active in Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. Shirley was not an alcoholic, but had known about AA from childhood [page 85] because her father was a recovering alcoholic. In Virginia, many of the AA members were from fundamentalist churches, and Shirley loved the group because they were "so spiritual."

After a decade in Virginia, Shirley, her husband, and their two children moved to a city in the Southwest, where they joined an Adult Children of Alcoholics group and Shirley started taking classes from a Jungian therapist. Through the Waldorf school that her children attended, she also started learning about anthroposophy, and soon found herself driving to a retreat center on weekends where she could learn more about it. She says, "It provided me with a real balance of microcosm and macrocosm, with spiritual freedom and moral imagination." She is still interested in anthroposophy, practices meditation every day, and through her work as a management consultant is trying to teach executives how to be more spiritual in the workplace.

When asked how she would summarize her present idea of spirituality, she replies, "That's an impossible question and it's immoral of you to ask." Chuckling at the abruptness of her answer, she explains, "We'd all like to be able to define spirituality, but it just can't be done."

Shirley Knight is perhaps an unusual case, because her search for spirituality has taken many twists and turns; she nevertheless illustrates the essence of a process-oriented spirituality. For her, spirituality is not found by living within a sacred habitation, but by negotiating with herself and with the various spiritual traditions with which she comes in contact to gain a better sense of her own spiritual path. Her life is not devoid of sacred space; for instance, she regards the body as a sacred space, and she demarcates a space in her bedroom in which to meditate. Yet she is more aptly described as a seeker who has been exposed to ideas and practices from many different sources and who has found it necessary to piece together her spirituality from these various sources.

Many people would not have had the interest to pursue spirituality as far and wide as Shirley Knight did; they would have settled into a single congregation and tried hard to make it their spiritual home. But the social conditions that prompted her to embark on a process of spiritual seeking are ones that have become increasingly common. The divorce that unsettled her family is characteristic of at least half of all American marriages, and the alcoholism from which her father was recovering is estimated to affect between a quarter and half of all American families. The erosion of denominational boundaries and the shopping that encourages young people to visit different congregations is well documented. So are the parachurch groups that give young people new experiences with religion on college campuses, and the religious studies courses that expose them to other world religions. Geographic mobility, occupational change, travel, and leisure time make spiritual seeking in wider circles possible, as do the many retreat centers, alternative religions, and twelve-step groups.

Now, the interesting thing about Lee Ackerman and Shirley Knight [page 86] is that they were both raised religious; indeed, in a survey, both would answer that they attended church every week as a child, and both would say they had been involved in Sunday school, received religious instruction, and participated in a church youth group. There the similarity ends. But we can learn something from both. Although Lee Ackerman's experience may be less common, it persists for some young people. From him, we learn the following: that a sense of sacred space—of dwelling with God—is important, whether that space is identified intuitively with the church building where we went to Sunday school, with the face of our Sunday school teacher, or with the family Bible in our parents' home; we also see that both formal and informal religious socialization is important, as the blending of evangelistic services and discussions after dinner illustrate; and we learn that community, family, and ethnic stability are all tied together with religious upbringing. Lee Ackerman's experience suggests that many of the things youth ministers do is right on target—providing occasions for friendships to develop, having meals together, hosting sleep-overs or lock-ins at the church, and providing some explicit instruction in religious teachings. His experience also suggests the difficulties of providing that kind of religious upbringing in a more mobile environment. Even he feels that the church is lagging behind the times and that it needs to adapt more quickly.

Shirley Knight illustrates the kind of religious upbringing that has been encouraged by pastors and parents who believe young people should make up their own minds about spirituality, after having been exposed to a full menu of it. She learned two things, despite the chaotic upbringing she experienced: that spirituality is important, and that there are many resources available for pursuing one's spirituality. Her parents were not simply indifferent to the life of the spirit, but were seekers themselves, and it would probably have been too much to ask them to settle into a single church for the sake of their daughter. She would have recognized their own restlessness. They taught her to be a spiritual seeker and exposed her to several religious traditions at a critical time in her adolescence. The reason she continued to seek and to shop around was that this is the way she was raised. Many youth pastors nowadays might find her closer to their own experiences than is Lee Ackerman. They provide teachings and experiences for their youth groups, but do so knowing that most of the young people there will move on in a year or two to something else.

If Shirley Knight is the future, she does not suggest a bright future for the church. She doesn't attend at all, and she finds most of her spiritual resources outside the church, at other places, and in a kind of generic faith that is more eclectic than Christianity. Yet she does suggest that the churches have a continuing role, even for a seeker like her, and that many seekers will perhaps settle temporarily into one church or another.

I suspect that both kinds of religious upbringing may need to be offered, perhaps emphasized differently in different churches or at different stages in adolescent development. Indeed, it may be important for individual [page 87] young people to have some exposure to both kinds of upbringing, for all of us have a longing for home, for a sacred space to which we can return when we need comfort and security, and all of us have a yearning to move on, to seek, and to explore. The one style is suggested in stories of the Garden of Eden and of the Promised Land; it consists of temple religion, and it occurs in the time of kings and of priests. A spirituality of process, in contrast, is tabernacle religion, the faith of pilgrims and sojourners; it clings to the diaspora or to prophets and judges, rather than to priests and kings. The one inheres in the mighty fortress, the other in desert mystics and itinerant preachers. The difference is depicted lyrically in the story of the Shulamite woman who at first revels in the security of her home—"our bed is green/the beams of our houses are cedar/and the rafters of fir"—and then wanders, seeking restlessly to find the warmth she has lost—"I will rise now .../and go about the city/in the streets and in the squares/I will seek the one I love."

But both types of spirituality are intentional, and they depend on resources we are given as children or later in life. Indeed, for either to be effective as a guide for the spiritual life, it must be deliberate, self-reflective, and disciplined. Lee Ackerman still finds God by praying and reading his Bible every day, and this is more important to him than the church he attends. Shirley Knight prays, meditates, does breathing exercises, and reads inspirational literature. She also devotes a lot of effort to her spiritual quest. Unlike many Americans, who simply take their faith for granted, these two people work at it.

Those are at least partial answers to what it means to grow up religious in our society. As we enter the next century, spirituality may have to be pieced together from many different sources for it to satisfy our increasingly diverse identities, but it can be pieced together reflectively,

deliberately, if its practitioners make conscious efforts to reflect on their spirituality, to learn from but also to set aside the influences of the spiritual marketplace, and in the process to pray, to engage in worshipful acts of devotion to the sacred, and to remember, commemorating the past as they deliberate about its meanings for the future. Spiritual practices generally take place with reference to other people who speak from the standpoint of religious communities, but practices do not come about simply from being immersed in a community. They require that time be set aside to bring into consciousness one's relationship with the sacred, and to reflect on what one has experienced of the sacred in everyday life. Their importance can also be transmitted, as parents often endeavor to do for their children, by example and by deliberate instruction, especially if skills at negotiation are included. Above all, spiritual practice is what William James once described so well as "a movement of the soul," in which a personal relationship with the mysterious power of the sacred is present. Where such movement is lacking, James warned, "religion is nothing;" and where it is present, the soul rises and religion is enlivened.