

The Heart of Religion: Love beyond Belief

This coming Monday, January 19, we honor the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., a modern apostle of the ethic of love.

“We must,” said Dr. King, “evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”

A current theologian with whom I am acquainted teaches a similar foundation for human well-being summarized in a condensed phrase she has coined, “love beyond belief.”

Her name is “Thandeka,” a single-word Xhosa name given her by Archbishop Desmond Tutu meaning “beloved.”

The inspiration for “love beyond belief” came to Dr. Thandeka from her studies of the German theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), called the “father of modern liberal theology.”

The root of religion, maintained Schleiermacher, is in feeling – “the feeling of being utterly dependent upon and an inextricable part of life itself.”

Following Schleiermacher’s lead, Dr. Thandeka preaches what she calls an “affect theology,” a theology that starts with feeling and emotion, with personal embodied experience.

Religion, she believes, rests upon this feeling foundation: it is of, from, and for the heart; it works with the raw emotional material of the heart.

Religion addresses: the traumatized heart, the unstrung heart, the bewildered heart, the fearful heart, the anxious heart, the longing heart, the despairing heart, the sorrowful heart, the shattered heart.

It also takes account of: the awakened heart, the aroused heart, the astonished heart, the heart cracked open by wonder and filled with awe, the heart that would be filled with poetry, praise, and song.

These are some of the moments, movements, motions, and emotions of the heart, and it is here where religion is born, and it is here where religion authentically lives.

Thus, true religion is “deeper than doctrine;” it’s not first of all what you believe, think, or put into propositions.

Real religion has to do with working with the embodied emotions that arise in the face of this reality upon which we are utterly dependent; it’s the reflection upon, the response to, and the transformation of such felt bodily experience.

Now, of course, the intellect will have its reasons, ideas, opinions, beliefs, and doctrines; but these are secondary, not primary.

So how does religion work with the raw emotions of the heart and body?

Here’s where “love beyond belief” comes in, for “love” or “lovingkindness” is the power that can transform the heart and its raw emotions.

If the origin of religion is about dealing with the feelings and emotions of the heart in the face of this wild and woolly universe we find ourselves in, then “love” is the means by which the heart threads its way through life and makes of it something meaningful and profound.

And the spiritual disciplines by which one gets to “love” are multiple; many different religious and philosophical systems will work.

Or, even no particular system, as attested to by the Dalai Lama when he says, “Kindness is my true religion.” That is, the goal is “lovingkindness,” the particular way of getting there is secondary.

“Love beyond belief” is a concise way of expressing the essence of religion, and it carries a double meaning.

First, as indicated above, the phrase conveys the perspective that when it comes to religion, belief is – or ought to be – a secondary phenomenon.

It’s not what you believe in your head or think with your mind; but it’s how you act, how you care, how you connect, how you treat others with lovingkindness, and how your heart is transformed.

Then, secondly, “love beyond belief” has to do with the depth of your actual loving – the practice and discipline of caring and loving with such purpose and power that it can only be called “unbelievable” – loving beyond all belief and expectation.

Thus, the beginning, middle, and end of religion may rightly be said to be “love beyond belief.”

Or, as Dr. King put it, “Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.”

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