

## WHAT RELIGION SHOULD BE DOING FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

By Walter Williams     October 12, 2009

Daisaku Ikeda said, "Religion exists for people; people do not exist for religion. Religion exists to be of help to people." Religion gives people comfort and strength in their struggles, a sense of purpose in life, hope for something beyond death, strong emotional feelings of love and acceptance, institutional sponsorship of art and music, stress reduction through chanting and meditation, and entertainment through ceremony. To be as effective as possible, religion must address the major problems that face people in their daily lives. Since conditions change over time, religions must also change if they wish to be effective in addressing the actual problems that are affecting people at this particular time.

Right now, many problems are facing people in their daily lives, and humanity as a whole. As I see it, the major problems that human beings are facing right now are:

### ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS:

- \*\* overpopulation of humans
- \*\* overpopulation of cows
- \*\* deforestation
- \*\* water shortages
- \*\* pollution

### POLITICAL PROBLEMS

- \*\* war
- \*\* problems of the nation state system (corruption)
- \*\* political restrictions on freedom (execution, torture, denial of human rights, denial of freedom of movement)
- \*\* economic advancement and scientific advancement

### PERSONAL PROBLEMS

- \*\* financial problems: greed, stress over financial care and survival.
- \*\* disparity of wealth and poverty,
- \*\* care for the elderly
- \*\* care for homeless children
- \*\* stress and worry over sexuality
- \*\* human rights: discrimination and prejudice
- \*\* animal rights

Once we have a clear focus on what the major problems are that face people on both the environmental, political, and personal levels, then we should design religious thought around those issues. Deciding what is moral and immoral should be based on what is best for humanity

and the ecosystem of which we are a part, at this particular moment in time. Moral ideas, then, must change with the needs of the time or else they will actually become counterproductive to human happiness and progress. This is what has happened on all sorts of issues, ranging from environmental to personal, from questions of war and peace to questions of sexuality and financial well being.

A first principle should be that religion should not lie. A religious position should not be based on untruths. If religious ideology forces people to conform their ideas to things that are factually not true, then that ideology is faulty. For example, in 2008 leaders of the Roman Catholic Church repeatedly made statements against the legalization of same-sex marriage, by asserting that “marriage has always been only between a man and a woman.” Anthropologists know that many cultures have, from the earliest times of human history, socially accepted same-sex marriage. To say otherwise is factually not true. Whatever one’s position on same-sex marriage, a religion should not be saying things that are not factually true. Another example is the issue of the age of the earth. If scientific investigation shows that the earth is many billions of years old, that numerous species of life have come and gone, then religious leaders should not be distorting evidence to assert, against all the evidence, that dinosaurs and human beings existed at the same time.

In our time, social and economic advancement depends heavily on an accurate understanding of reality. Scientific knowledge is the base upon which research must proceed. When Galileo concluded that the earth revolved around the sun, he was excommunicated for contradicting the Bible. Religion should not hold to every word of a sacred text, or to any specific teaching, if investigation shows that text to be inaccurate. Religion should conform to reality, not expect reality to conform to it.

Others may add other issues to the above, but to my mind these are among the top issues facing humanity today and in the future. A religion that is going to be effective must respond to these issues. Let’s take them one by one.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Fundamental to all the environmental problems facing humanity today is that there are too many people in the world. It took all of human history until the year 1830 for there to reach a billion people; then in only one century the population doubled. But since 1930, during one person’s lifetime, the world population has grown from two billion to now over 6.7 billion people. With such a sharp rise of numbers, humans have become a cancer on the earth. Demographers suggest the ideal population for a sustainable environment is about two to three billion people. Religion, therefore, should do everything it can to reduce population. Not just reduce the RATE of population growth, but to reduce the numbers themselves. What great

tragedy would ensue if human population went back to what it was in 1930, only eighty years ago?

#### RELIGION SHOULD ENCOURAGE PEOPLE NOT TO REPRODUCE

How can religion do this? The main reason that most people have children is to have someone to provide them with loving care when they are old. If a child is devoted and has strong values of compassion, they are an ideal person to care for their parents. However, many adults do not feel the desire or ability to care for their parents. Some parents' children die or are themselves incapacitated. So, having children is not a dependable way to make sure that everyone has someone to take care of them when they are old.

#### RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT SHOULD PROVIDE GOOD CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

Government can provide basic services for the elderly. Basic medical care to prevent pain and suffering, adequate food, adequate shelter. When a person becomes too old to take care of their own needs, they should not have to suffer for want of these basic survival needs of food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. Religion can serve an important function in encouraging people to willingly tax themselves to provide for the common good in elder care. However, government programs are often done on a bureaucratic basis, with little compassion and care for the emotional needs of people. This is what religion can best provide. What religion must do is to encourage a kind and compassionate attitude toward all elderly persons, and those who cannot care for themselves. Eldercare, whether of relatives or persons not related, should be a major emphasis for religion. If religion will help to provide good care for the elderly, there will be less pressure on people to reproduce. They will not feel worried that they will be alone and uncared for when they are old, if they know that they will be held as valued elders by those who are younger. Respect for the elderly should be a major emphasis for religion.

#### RELIGION SHOULD PROVIDE VIABLE ALTERNATIVES FOR PEOPLE TO LIVE EMOTIONALLY RICH AND FULFILLED LIVES OUTSIDE OF REPRODUCTIVE FAMILIES

An even more important role for religion is the promotion of single-sex monasteries and nunneries, as an alternative for people who do not want to get married and reproduce. The goal of monks and nuns should be to devote their life to social service. The Catholic Church and Buddhist religions, which both have strong traditions of monastic institutions, can serve a major function for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in reducing global overpopulation by offering these institutions as a tangible realistic alternative to marriage/children. Religion should encourage maximum numbers of people to dedicate their life to becoming a monk or a nun, and living as part of a monastic community. They can live in this community from adolescence to elderly, and all the way through life to the end.

The problem with attracting maximum numbers of people to becoming monks or nuns is that both Buddhism and Catholicism have attached so many rules and requirements for

monastics that many people do not want to conform to all these rules. Buddhist rules require all monastics to shave their head. This one rule is why many young women do not want to become a nun, and many males as well. Hair becomes a more important factor than the ideology of compassion and kindness. There should be an elimination of as many arbitrary rules as possible. The basic idea of not being vain, and so concerned for one's personal beauty, is a good idea, but that good idea has been perverted into a rigid rule that is counterproductive to the religion's effectiveness. If some people want to be monastics, but do not wish to shave their hair, why should hair length be the determining factor?

Another example concerns what time of day monastics eat. The basic idea is that monastics should not overindulge in eating, and should not be a burden on the community because of their heavy diets. That is a good idea. But then that gets converted into a rule, for some sects of Buddhism but not others, that monks and novices should not eat anything after noon. That arbitrary rule, that is followed so slavishly in most of Southeast Asia but not in much of Northeast Asia, is not healthy for people who have low blood sugar, and it is especially not healthy for young adolescents, whose bodies are growing rapidly and need regular nurturance. Why should a teenager suffer the pangs of hunger due to a silly arbitrary rule that has no purpose in modern society? Religion must change, and not be so rigid.

One of the most damaging rules, for both Buddhist and Catholic monastics, is the idea that masturbation and sex is sinful. This rule, prohibiting even masturbation, is against nature. Human bodies are designed for sex, and sexual desire is a very basic part of our mammalian heritage. It is unnatural to deny the body sexual release and fulfillment. By making sex a sin, and forcing so many people to feel guilty when they have sexual desires, religion has done terrible evil in so many billions of lives over the last several thousand years of these religions' existence. This is one of the greatest evils and sins that religions have foisted onto people, making so many lead lives of guilt and misery. And it was all done for such a useless purpose.

Now, given that humanity is overpopulated, reproduction should be stigmatized. I am not advocating that people should be made to feel guilty and sinful if they reproduce, but religion could encourage the notion that a person who reproduces does not have time to devote themselves to the higher religious concerns of life. Therefore, those who do not reproduce will be looked upon as more capable of fulfilling their spiritual potential.

The most significant population reductions can occur by increasing the size of nunneries in particular. Even if young women become novices and nuns for only a decade, that cuts into their reproductive phase and will lead to lower birth rates. In order to attract the maximum number of young females to become nuns, old patriarchal attitudes that monks are superior to nuns must be abandoned. Independent women-run nunneries for women and girls should be under female hierarchies, not male-only institutions. Absolute equality on sex and gender must be the rule.

Given the reality of erotic desires, and the reality of overpopulation, what this means is that religion must simultaneously discourage reproductive sex and encourage non-reproductive sex. This means religions must do the exact opposite of what they have done in the past, when

reproductive sexual acts have been held up to be “natural” and “normal,” while non-reproductive acts have been stigmatized as “unnatural” and “abnormal.” In other words, religions must now reject the idea that non-reproductive erotic acts are “perverted” and sinful. Instead, erotic enjoyment that is not reproductive must be held up as a model for what a moral person should do.

Of course, no one should be forced, or even pressured in any way, to be sexual if they do not wish to be. A small minority of humans is born without any sexual desire, and others are influenced by events in their lives to dislike sex. If they do not want to participate in sex, that is fine. They should not be pressured to be sexual, or stigmatized as “abnormal” in any way. People differ, and not everyone is the same. A non-sexual minority should not be stigmatized, no more than those who do have sexual feelings should be made to feel guilty over them.

What this means is that religions should stop condemning erotic feelings and non-reproductive behaviors. The easiest way for them to do this is to redefine “celibacy” for monastics. Celibacy should be defined as no sexual intercourse (penile insertion into a vagina) because AIDS is a major disease problem facing humanity, and AIDS is sexually transmitted primarily through intercourse (penile insertion into a vagina or into an anus), then intercourse should be defined as both vaginal and anal. So, what this means is that all other erotic behaviors (masturbation, mutual masturbation, stimulation of the genitals by the hand or mouth, or between the legs or other body parts), is not “sex.” It is basically defined as massage, and having no more implication for morals than the massage of any other part of the body. In other words, it should be seen as silly, and as outside the proper realm of religion, to make rules prohibiting someone from rubbing the genitals as to prohibit someone from giving a backrub.

Now, if someone tried to give someone else a backrub when that other person did not want a backrub, that person could be arrested by police for assault and harassment. If someone tried to impose themselves sexually onto another person who was unwilling, then they likewise could be arrested for assault and harassment. The problem is not “sex” but assault and harassment. Buddhist ethics of not causing another person to experience suffering and unhappiness is the best moral rule to apply in this case. Teaching people to be kind and considerate of others’ feelings, to care more for the happiness of others than for their own selfish happiness, is what should be emphasized in moral training. A new morality is needed, where the sex, class, age, or marital status of the person is not the issue; kindness and compassion is the issue.

## RELIGION SHOULD MAKE A MAJOR EFFORT TO CARE FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN

Another big problem is a large number of homeless children in the world. Adults who wish to raise children should be encouraged to adopt or foster parent, rather than reproduce. International adoption needs to be made much easier and less expensive so that finding good homes for them is the goal. Governments place so many restrictions on adoption and it is heavily bureaucratized. Religious institutions should give high priority to taking care of homeless kids, in orphanages. Child homelessness can be dealt with by the elder issue, and a solution to both

issues is related. My research cross culturally (see especially my book JAVANESE LIVES: WOMEN AND MEN IN MODERN INDONESIAN SOCIETY) shows that the happiest elderly people are those who feel that they are contributing something beneficial to society, that they are helping others. This may be devoting their time to helping their grandkids, or to helping society in general, but they feel they are helping in some way.

One of the biggest problems US society has is that we waste the resources of the elderly. Many are stuck in nursing homes where they literally die of boredom. Many feel lonely and alienated. If we are going to encourage more people not to reproduce, then many people will not have kids to take care of them when they get old. There will need to be institutions where they can receive good care but also can make positive contributions to society. The elderly should be responsible for caring for all the homeless kids in the world. Shelters for mothers with children should be integrated into eldercare facilities. The young and the old can help each other if they are brought together. The best way to do this is through religious institutions.

### RELIGION SHOULD ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO AVOID EATING MAMMALS

The focus of my writing has been on the specific tangible changes that people can do, right now, to save the environment. For example, don't reproduce, stop eating beef, plant more trees, etc. Eating insects is the answer to how humans can live without wrecking the environment. If some business can come up with a practical efficient way to raise insects, cook them, grind them up into a powder and distribute this widely, it could be the basis for ending world hunger. Overpopulation of humans is matched by an overpopulation of cows and pigs. Cows especially are damaging to the environment for three reasons:

1. when cows digest grass, they burp methane gas that is doing major damage to the ozone layer of the upper atmosphere.
2. cows need large areas of pastureland. Many forests are being cut down to make more pastures for cows. This is a major contributor to the problem of deforestation.
3. cows are a major contributor to water shortages, because they drink so much, and the plants they eat need so much water to grow.

The reason there is such an overpopulation of cows is because more people are eating so much more beef than in the past. Religion should discourage the eating of mammals. A higher spiritual awareness should be considered to be gained by not defiling one's body by eating red meat. People should either be encouraged to become vegetarian, or to eat insects as their major source of protein. If cows are not used for food or for labor, then (just as what happened a century ago, when automobiles replaced horses for transportation) there will be many fewer cows bred. Cows may be kept for milk production only, but not for killing and eating them. When milk cows die a natural death from old age, their bodies may be used for dog food and cat food, to prevent their body going to waste. But the massive killing of mammals must stop.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religion had a major role in turning public attitudes against human slavery. The abolitionist movement really began in the Christian churches, and it gained moral authority by religion. Even though the Bible explicitly recognized slavery, the churches became

the major institution that spread anti-slavery sentiment. Now it is time for religion to make a similar campaign against animal slavery. If religion would provide a basis of moral condemnation concerning the using of animal slavery and killing animals for food, then that could make a major difference in reducing environmental problems. Governments should heavily tax meat products, and make the buying and selling of beef cows illegal in many areas.

## RELIGION SHOULD CEREMONIALIZE THE PLANTING OF TREES

Religion should help to encourage reforestation by encouraging people to give trees instead of flowers at funerals. The trees can then be planted in memory of that person, and the person's burial in a simple biodegradable cloth bag should be buried with a tree planted over the body so that the tree will gain nurturance from the body. Cemeteries should be urban forests, to help improve air quality. Plant barriers of trees along both sides of freeways, in memory of deceased people. People should be buried in their church or temple graveyard, or in a local neighborhood park, rather than burned or cremated. Zoning ordinances should be changed to allow these burials. When pets die, they likewise should be buried with a tree planting above the body. Religion should ceremonialize these tree plantings as part of their religion. Sunday schools should teach children to root tree seedlings and then to plant the young trees as memorials to their ancestors.

The Hebrew Bible laid out ten commandments as most important. According to the author of the Book of Exodus (chapter 20), the ten most important things are listed in chapter 20:1-17.

Drawing on my knowledge of animism, Buddhism, and Christianity, I have adapted the Judaic code laid down 3,000 years ago, to today. Some of those commandments are still applicable to today, but others need to be updated to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
1. Thou shalt not make war on the basis of religion.
  
2. Thou shalt make no graven image... for I the Lord your God am a jealous god, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.
2. Thou shall pursue and encourage art, efficiency, tranquility, creativity, and justice for all living beings, and bring as much happiness as possible into the lives of others, and into one's own life.
  
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
- 3 Thou shalt not deride or insult any living being as inferior to yourself. All living beings have the potential for enlightenment within them.
  
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.... In it thou shalt not do any work.

4. Remember the earth, to keep it undamaged. Plant trees, conserve resources, After working for six days, thou shalt take a rest from labor, to rest, relax, enjoy life, and pursue spiritual concerns.

5. Honor your father and mother.

5. Honor your father and mother, and show kindness, compassion and support for all living beings, but especially for all elderly people, and for all young children.

6. Thou shalt not kill.

6. Thou shalt not kill either human nor mammal, unless such killing is done out of compassion to prevent immediate and extreme suffering.

7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

7. Thou shalt not overpopulate the earth, and throw the environment into decline. Thou shalt not impose oneself, sexually or otherwise, on others who are unwilling and who object.

8. Thou shalt not steal.

8. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt do unto others, that which one would want to be done to oneself.

9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

9. Thou shalt not lie. Thou shalt pursue the truth in all things, and encourage learning.

10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house... or anything that is your neighbor's.

10. Thou shalt not be jealous, or greedy, or materialistic. Thou shalt show generosity and sharing toward those who are in need.

DONE TO THIS POINT: NEED TO REVISE BELOW IDEAS AND ADD]

## HOMOPHOBIA ISSUES

The focus of my research has been to show examples of other cultures that accepted same-sex relationships and same-sex marriages. I wrote a book on American Indian religions, in which homosexuals and transgendered people were central religious leaders, to show their importance in animism (the world's oldest religion). The implications of this is that Western homophobia is unnecessary and indeed socially maladaptive to the realities of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Homophobia is reflective of the old agriculturalist mindset, which emphasizes the need to increase population. In a society like today, in which overpopulation is a major problem, homophobia prevents social acceptance of same sex love, which needs to be accepted as one part



of the effort to cut down population size. Therefore, homophobia issues are tied in closely with environmental issues.

However, the main problem with these traditions is that they expect the monks and nuns to be celibate. Sex is the big issue around which the traditional religious institutions flounder. As long as they have unrealistic expectations that people will be nonsexual, there will inevitably be continual scandals and stress in peoples' lives (due to guilt over sexual feelings, etc). Celibacy needs to be redefined as non-reproductiveness. A new morality needs to be developed, in which "sin" is redefined away from sexual acts and toward irresponsible actions toward the environment (ex. Reproducing, killing trees, eating mammals, etc).

Homosexuals could become a major benefit to society (as they used to be in ancient times, when homosexuals were often religious leaders) if they were channeled into these kind of single-sex monasteries. Instead, parents strongly pressure their homosexual children to get married heterosexually and have children (which contributes to overpopulation). What my research shows is that societies that accept homosexuals have developed certain ways to insure the care for elderly people who do not reproduce. Western society lacks these institutions, and pressures everyone to get married and have children, partly so they will have someone to take care of them in their old age. Those who rebel against this norm, then move to join a separate gay subculture. This subculture has many problems: lack of purpose in life, low self-esteem leading to drug and alcohol addictions, alienation from spirituality, HIV infection.

My interests in HIV prevention education grows out of my direct experience with the gay community, but also applies to nongays. Prevention of disease is part of the larger use of my work as tangible benefit for society.

Right now the internet is promoting a thorough sexual revolution. Its effects are only beginning to be seen. A religious institution that does not accommodate this reality is doomed to be irrelevant. What is needed are new religious leaders who can accept that humans are hardwired biologically to be sexual, and sexual repression is damaging to the individual and to society at large. Religion needs to free itself from sexual repression. If it can do this, there will be a new flowering of spirituality as religious institutions take on major roles in organizing the main alternative to marriage.

## ELDERCARE

In Buddhism there is a tradition that a person of any age can seek spirituality by joining a monastery. What this means in practical terms is that after the death of a spouse many elderly people join a monastery or nunnery. This provides a place for them to live, where they can be cared for in their final years, avoiding elder homelessness. There they can focus on meditation and developing their spirituality in the time before their death. Or, they can devote themselves to social service.

What is needed is a new religious attitude, in which the focus is social care (addressing society's main current problems, whatever they happen to be at the time). But sex should be removed as an object of religious concern. Religion should have no opinion or involvement in what people are doing sexually, just as long as a person is treating others with kindness and consideration. Sexual compulsion, forced sex, rape, etc. should of course be condemned, not because it is sex but because it is forcing someone to do something they do not want to do.

The Bible justifies slavery in many places. However, modern society has evolved beyond slavery, and religious institutions do not lecture people to reinstitute slavery today. The precise same approach ought to be taken toward sex. The Bible's approach toward sex is as outdated as is its approach toward slavery. For example, the Bible condemns masturbation, and says it is "wasting seed." However, new medical studies show that adolescents who have regular sexual orgasms at least once a week, tend to have better health in their old age, than adolescents who repressed their sexual desires and avoided orgasms. The new medical knowledge means we have to understand that the Bible is simply as wrong about sex as it is about slavery.

Because Buddhism does not have a history of condemning homosexuality, it has greater potential as a religion for the future. I have interviewed countless Catholics who talk about the profound guilt they felt due to masturbation and other sexual desires which the church condemns. But if the Catholic Church can free itself from its homophobic attitudes of the past, and its obsession with condoms, abortion, masturbation, and homosexuality, it could likewise be a major force for good in the world.

Ultimately, all my work is about reducing prejudices, relieving people from stress about their sexual feelings, saving the environment, and helping people to have better lives in the future. I take a very pragmatic, applied anthropological approach toward social change. My research is tied in closely with my activism (see "Walter Williams Life of Activism in Human Rights" on the left column at <http://livefully.info> ). Both my activism and my research is for the purpose of helping to make the world a better place in the future. I know that my work has had an effect in the past, and I work toward a greater impact on society in the future. What I most need now is an assistant to help me get all of this work done, so that I can focus on my thinking and my writing. I feel that after a lifetime of research in many Native American cultures, in Polynesian, African, and Asian cultures, I am on the cusp of formulating a new paradigm for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My analysis about what is going on today is based on understanding that there are three major eras of human history. The first, by far the longest, was when humans lived in hunter-gatherer societies, from 200,000 years ago. Only 10,000 years ago, the second stage of human history began with the agricultural revolution. The basic institutions of our society, especially religious institutions, emerged during this agricultural era. Only 200 years ago the third era of human history began with the industrial revolution. Right now humanity is entering a new fourth era, based on the incredible communications revolution due to computers and the internet. Because

this fourth era is so new, we do not know yet what forms it will take, but it is already revolutionizing the way people interact. Yet, many of our institutions and attitudes remain mired in the agricultural mindset. The major conflicts in society today, from California Proposition 8 on marriage, along with most sex scandals in the news, to immigration policy and economics, is reflective of this revolution. If my writings can help people adjust to these new realities, then it can make a major contribution to human progress.