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Meantime, whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely; it is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject, and on his word, . . . be he who he may, I can accept nothing.

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Emerson's celebrated "Divinity School Address" was delivered before the senior class in Divinity College at Harvard in July 1838. The invitation came six years after he had resigned his pulpit at Second Church in Boston, and it prompted his most sustained thinking on the nature of religion and the role of ministry outside of his sermons. His remarks stirred considerable debate and the taking of sides between the Unitarian "orthodox" and the Transcendentalists, with the latter defending Emerson. Even today Emerson's words are provocative and revolutionary. The essential message of the address is that "the religious sentiment" is innate and intuitive in human experience. Ministers make religion vital, not by worshipping Jesus or venerating the Bible, but by leading their parishioners to look

within for revelations of the divine and for guidance in living an ethical life.

Emerson's argument proceeds from a description of the beauty and beneficence of nature. The earth is viewed as a natural communion of corn and wine, an "original blessing," in spiritual theo-munion. Matthew Fox's use of the term. Emerson is laying the groundwork for a theology based not on doctrine, scripture, or tradition, but on an understanding and appreciation of the natural world, which is suffused with "laws which traverse the universe and make things the way they are." These laws are essentially moral in nature and awaken in us "the sentiment of virtue." They "refuse to be adequately stated," says Emerson, and "elude our persevering thought; yet we read them hourly in each other's faces, in each other's actions, in our own remorse."

For Emerson, "this sentiment is the essence of all religion." He goes on to describe the nature of the moral laws that give rise to it. In the first place, these laws are universal. "They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance." Thus in the human soul "there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire." Those who do a good deed are instantly ennobled; those who do a mean deed are just as surely diminished. If we deceive or dissemble, we are alienated from ourselves and out of sync with the world.

Second, these laws are certain and inexorable. "Character is always known," Emerson says. "Thefts never enrich; alms never impoverish; murder will speak out of stone walls." By the same token, "speak the truth, and all nature and all spirits help you with unexpected furtherance. Speak the truth, and all things alive or brute are vouchers, and the very roots of the grass there do seem to stir and move to bear you witness." That is to say, if we have integrity—if we are at one with ourselves—we will also be in harmony with the world. Like attracts like, whether good or evil.

In the third place, these laws proceed from one will, one mind, everywhere active, "in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool," and whatever opposes it is ultimately defeated. Emerson is a monist, not a dualist. For him, good is positive. Evil is merely "priv-

ative," not absolute. It's like cold, which is the absence of heat. "All evil is so much death or nonentity." Benevolence alone is absolute and real:

All things proceed out of the same spirit, and all things conspire with it. Whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature. In so far as he roves from these ends, he bereaves himself of power . . . his being shrinks . . . he becomes less and less, a mote, a point, until absolute badness is absolute death.

The perception of this law awakens the moral sentiment, which is the key to human happiness. "The assurance that Law is sovereign over all of nature" means that we live in a moral universe and therefore have a basis for morality that is independent of doctrine and scripture. Because human beings are part and parcel of the natural world, "the fountain of all good" is equally in us. Each person is "an inlet into the depths of Reason" and, because of this, intuitively knows right from wrong.

In Emerson's view, "This sentiment lies at the foundation of society, and successively creates all forms of worship." Because it is innate, it never entirely dies out. The purest expressions of this sentiment are sublime and are to be found "not alone in Palestine," but also in Egypt, Persia, India, and China. As Emerson is at pains to show, this sentiment is a direct intuition into the nature of things and can't be had from other persons or past ages. The history of the Christian church reflects this degradation of primary faith. Emerson concedes that Jesus "belonged to the true race of prophets." Alone in history, Jesus recognized the greatness of humanity and the infinite possibilities of human life. "One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth to take possession of his World." But the Christian church has distorted Jesus' message. Christianity has replaced Jesus the man with Jesus the myth, and "churches are built not on his principles, but his tropes." The miracles ascribed to him are an example of what the church has done. "He spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle," Emerson says. "But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian

churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."

Historical Christianity has made the mistake of exaggerating the person of Jesus. But, according to Emerson, the soul "knows no person of Jesus. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe." Instead of ascribing greatness to humanity, as Jesus did, the churches have reserved it only for Jesus, painting him a demigod and elevating him so much above the rest of us that they have vitiated the power of his example. In effect, what the churches teach is this: "That you shall not own the world; you shall not dare and live after the infinite Law that is in you, . . . but you must subordinate your nature to Christ's nature; you must accept our interpretations, and take his portrait as the vulgar draw it."

To the contrary, Emerson says, "That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the stoical doctrine, Obey thyself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen." The great religious teachers evoke our own goodness by the power of their example. Jesus serves us likewise, and not by virtue of the miracles he's alleged to have performed. To aim to convert followers by an appeal to miracle is "a profanation of the soul." Not by miracles, but "only by coming again to themselves, or to God in themselves, can [people] grow furthermore."

A second defect of historical Christianity, related to the first, is that the soul is not considered the basis of our moral nature, only a revelation given once and for all long ago. But "the spirit only can teach," Emerson says. Only the one on whom the soul descends and through whom speaks has authority. Because the church relies instead on scripture and dogma as the basis of authority, it totters on the brink of extinction.

It's incumbent upon ministers to preach the doctrine of the soul. "Preaching," says Emerson, "is the expression of the moral sentiment in application to the duties of life." But the office of preaching is not being discharged:

In how many churches, by how many prophets, tell me, is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens

are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God?

Instead, many ministers are formalists who preach doctrine rather than faith. "Faith," Emerson insists, "should blend with the light of rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers. But now the priest's Sabbath has lost the splendor of nature; it is unlovely; we are glad when it is done."

Emerson describes a service he attended in his church in Concord that left him quite disappointed. The minister gave no indication that he had ever laughed or wept, had ever been commended or cheated or chagrined, no indication that he had ever lived at all. "The true preacher," to the contrary, "can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life,—life passed through the fire of thought." Ministers do not always preach effectively, Emerson says, but woe to those who are "called to the pulpit and *not* give the bread of life." Too much preaching "comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul." It is traditional and routine and turns people away from the churches.

The loss of worship leads to the decay of society. What can be done to change this situation? The inertness of religion, which results from closing the book on revelation and worshipping Jesus instead of presenting him as a man, indicates the error of our ways:

It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake. The true Christianity,—a faith like Christ's in the infinitude of man—is lost. None believeth in the soul of man, but only in some man or person old and departed.

Secondary knowledge is insufficient. Emerson admonishes the students to go alone, "to love God without mediator or veil." Forego imitation and stultifying habit: "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint man at first hand with Deity."

For all our slavery to routine and "penny-wisdom," we do have sublime thoughts and value the few times when we feel awake and alive. We also remember times when ministers made our souls wiser, when they spoke what we thought, told us what we knew, and

encouraged us to be what we inwardly are. The remedy to a lifeless formalism in the pulpit is “first soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul.” Christianity has given us the Sabbath, Emerson insists, and the institution of preaching. Ministers should breath new life into these forms and demonstrate that the “supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those Eastern men . . . and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also.”

Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” was a watershed document in American religious history and in the evolution of Unitarianism. Unitarians in Emerson’s day were more liberal in their views than other Christians, but tended to believe that Jesus was divine, even if he was not God. They believed in the Christian revelation and the historical validity of the Gospels and, as evidence, insisted on the veracity of the miracles performed by Jesus. They believed in the transcendence and the personality of God, and they believed that morality was grounded in scripture and doctrine, assisted by the use of reason.

Emerson’s address flew in the face of these views. In the course of his remarks, he denied the personality and transcendence of God, asserting instead that God was an impersonal law or soul immanent in the world. In this he was accused, with some justification, of pantheism. He insisted that Jesus was a human being who realized the potential to identify with God and, in providing a model, made that a possibility for others as well. Every person, in Emerson’s way of thinking, “may expand to the full circle of the universe.” In denying the divinity of Jesus, he rejected the validity of the miracles as well. In place of scripture and doctrine as the basis of morality, he grounded goodness in an intuition of the moral laws that suffuse the universe.

Since, for Emerson, God is within the human soul, religion is universal and immediate. Religion is not based on a particular revelation that occurred once and for all long ago. Nor is it a hand-me-down sort of thing, dependent for its existence and validity on scripture, doctrine, or ecclesiastical authority. Religion is a present reality, grounded in nature and human experience, or it is nothing. It’s the minister’s role and duty to preach “the doctrine of the soul,” namely,

to make man “sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and the heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God.”

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*Creation is original blessing, and all the subsequent blessings—those we give our loved ones and those we struggle to bring about by healing, celebration, and justice making—are prefigured in the original blessing that creation is, a blessing so thoroughly unconditional, so fully graced, that we can go through life hardly noticing it at all. Our religions are capable of building their magnificent temples, housing their vast followers, teaching their elaborate catechisms, and raising their considerable sums of money, but forgetting entirely about the grace of creation. Boredom, depression, and what our ancestors called the sin of “acedia” (or *ennui*) occur when we get cut off from the sense of grace and blessing.*

—Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality*

In one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established, live at second-hand upon their tradition; but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case;—so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete.

—William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

- Emerson begins the Divinity School Address with a meditation on what Matthew Fox might term “original blessing,” an appeal for an earth-based spirituality. Why do you suppose he does this?

- Emerson aimed to ground morality in nature and human nature. He believed that “the sentiment of virtue” is innate in human experience and that the natural world is suffused with “laws which traverse the universe and make things the way they are.” Do you agree? What is the ground of your moral sensibility, your sense of right and wrong?
- Emerson rejected scripture and doctrine as the basis of faith, insisting that religion “cannot be received at second hand.” For him spirituality is a matter of personal experience. What is the basis of faith for you?
- Emerson denied the divinity of Jesus, the veracity of miracles, and the personality of God. On the other hand, he believed very strongly in what he termed “the infinitude of man.” What are your views on Jesus, miracles, God, and man? Do you find yourself in agreement with Emerson?
- “In how many churches,” Emerson asks, “is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God?” Is this true of your experience of church? Do you think it should be?
- For all of his criticism of religious institutions, Emerson felt that we should not abandon them, but breathe new life into them. What’s your view? Can religion, as we understand the word today, be saved?
- Some argue that Emerson’s (and William James’s) stress on personal experience has the effect of encouraging individualism at the expense of religious institutions. Do you agree?