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Unhealthy Religion

BY FR GARY BRAUN, DIRECTOR

I don't know about you, but in all honesty, it takes a fair bit of courage to clean out a refrigerator. It tastes so good at dinner, so we put it in there eagerly awaiting leftovers! But sometimes we forget... And after a week and then two weeks... And then a month... All of a sudden it doesn't look like food anymore. And open the lid and it doesn't smell like food anymore. I never knew you could make penicillin out of pineapple! How can something that was so good become something so bad?

Yet that is precisely what happens with religion sometimes. How can something so good as religion that leads to so much human flourishing, that helps so many people hope and hang on, that contributes so much to the good of society and has served so many and helped the poor like nothing else in the world including governments, something so ancient, how does it become sometimes so toxic?

The Gospels (see especially Mark 7) hint at how something in that great religion to which Jesus belonged had become extraordinarily toxic and truly unhealthy. Just as our own Catholic Church had become in different centuries. What is the difference between healthy and unhealthy religion? How can we tell if the practice of religion, especially our own, is healthy or not? And given the issues of our day, given the issues going on in our own Catholic Church, given the conversation about Mormonism that is taking place on our nation's stage these days given the religious extremism of our time, and given the diversity of religions all around us on this campus, maybe it's time to reflect on that question.

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Unhealthy religion is religion that is too black-and-white and reduces all reality to a black-and-white world can get triumphalist and even mean, whereas healthy religion understands gray, appreciates ambiguity, understands we may not have answers for the new challenges of our days. Healthy religion understands the need to listen to the lived experience of people across the world, especially those who criticize us. There are some absolutes, but perhaps not quite so many. If we get so black and white, we create insiders and outsiders, something Jesus was passionate about NOT doing with faith. “Oh, you can’t pay your temple tax, sorry you can’t come in! Oh, you work on the Sabbath, sorry, that makes you unclean! Oh, you are supporting the wrong political party, you don’t cut the mustard! Oh you don’t sing the right songs or pray the right way or name God the same way I do or love the way I love, sorry but you don’t belong!” For Jesus, it was more about inclusion, and NOT exclusion!

In unhealthy religion, we find ourselves over attached to it, religion becomes an end in itself, instead of a spring board into the rest of the world and into life, which is another hallmark of true religion, healthy religion.

Unhealthy religion focuses exclusively almost on the next life, whereas healthy religion focuses on this life primarily never forgetting this life leads to the next life. And healthy religion will always teach gratitude and remind me to be grateful, first and foremost.

Unhealthy religion is religion in which practice substitutes for relationship with God, whereas healthy religion is all at the service of connecting us with the true and living God. Religion gets unhealthy when we find ourselves going through the motions, and our heart is no longer in it. In healthy religion we do our best to keep our heart engaged in the practices that we've done over the years and in our favor. For Jesus, it was not about external observance but interior transformation—changing our hearts.

Unhealthy religion is a religion people use to confirm their pre-existing ideologies, instead of to challenge themselves into new ways of thinking, and living.

Unhealthy religion seems to always need to have an enemy; always makes that culture is only dark and negative and brutal and demonic. It seems to always have to need an enemy to be strong. Whereas healthy religion understands that the culture is a mixed bag: sometimes dark and evil for sure but also full of grace and full of the presence of God. It doesn't just focus on what it is against, it also focuses on what it is for.

Unhealthy religion uses convictions and principles and doctrines to shame others who do not conform to how we think things should be, whereas healthy religion never uses shame and actually works hard to set people free from shame and encourages people to live up to their ideals and become their own best selves!

In a healthy religion benevolent leadership genuinely is concerned about the welfare of those it leads; whereas in unhealthy religion, leadership is concerned about control over those it leads. If leaders are concerned about the loyalty of the people instead of being concerned about loyalty to the people. Healthy religions refuse to play on peoples' fears.

In unhealthy religion, I am God's favorite! But in healthy religion it's the experience of being loved and chosen that sends me out to love others as I have been loved. Instead of focusing on my own self-fulfillment, which can only leave me more self-centered, a healthy religion focuses instead on being totally engaged in the messiness of life and the transformation of the whole world.

The bottom line is that everything we are about in healthy religion is towards deepening our compassion. It understands the need out of compassion to take care of the poor. (James 1:21b-22,27)

Part of a priests' job, is to pay attention to that in you and in us together--To watch out to what might be becoming toxic into what is healthy and life-giving. Because what is true about healthy religion also describes what is true about healthy people. But it's also the job of us all to become aware and help others to be healthy, with love.

Personally, I love the Catholic Church. I am utterly committed to the Catholic Church. And I don't want this church that I love to get sick in any way. I am utterly committed to working hard for us to be the healthiest we can be together and individually. And it's my hope, that each of us will be challenged and consoled along the Way.

It seems to me, it's time to check the Tupperware, smell the milk, and lift up the lids of those leftovers, because every once in a while we all need to clean out the fridge. Because if we are not careful, something so good can become just so bad!

This homily was delivered on 9/9/2012.





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