

**Ethical Culture as *More than a Religion***  
**A Platform Address delivered by Hugh Taft-Morales**  
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During my secular childhood, religion arose in my consciousness as curious social institutions, strange rituals, and doorbell proselytizers. It all seemed odd, and didn't appeal to me. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of my few religious heroes, though clearly it was not because of his faith in god but because of his faith in human beings. WE need more faith in people, more ethical living here today, and in Ferguson and around the world. King's ethical inspiration is a big part of why I – one who grew up in a very profane environment – now dedicate myself to Ethical Culture.

Teaching at an Episcopal school after college, I spoke of Dr. King in numerous chapel services but continued to be unimpressed by organized religion. When I wandered into Ethical Culture at the age of forty, I wasn't looking for religion. I just wanted a place where my family and I could explore how to live more ethically. It was how I wanted to honor those I most admired, like Martin Luther King.

So, at first, I didn't call Ethical Culture my religion. In fact, at my first National Leaders Council meeting (where EC Leaders gather three times a year) I found myself in a tiny minority wondering aloud if we should stop calling Ethical Culture a religion. [That "tiny minority," by the way, was me and Bob Greenwell!] Besides the negative impact such heresy would have on our tax status, the conviction of so many Ethical Culture Leaders to describe us as a "religion" contributed to an evolution in my thinking.

Today I can trace how Ethical Culture evolved in my mind from being a "new vocation" to a "growing faith" to "my religion." Unlike many Ethical Culture Leaders whose skepticism led them from the traditional religion of their youth to our unique brand of religious humanism, I came to it from secularism. Perhaps it is why my goal today is to strengthen your appreciation for, and commitment to, Ethical Culture, *whether it is your religion or not or will ever be.*

I'll offer several reasons why I call Ethical Culture "my religion." I do so, however, not to convince anyone to start calling it their religion. My purpose is to explain the uniqueness of Ethical Culture in that it's a religion for some and not for others. Ethical Culture attracts some who have little interest in religion. Ethical Culture is not their religion, yet they join with those for whom it is a religion. We celebrate this diversity as a strength so we can better work together where we agree.

These days I think we agree on a few of things: the importance of (1) honoring the worth of every person and (2) building social justice. And I think we agree that (3) we honor worth and build justice most effectively through ethical relationships.

We all work to promote these values, but some of us do this work as our religion - others do not. This fact is part of why I love Ethical Culture.

## On to SOME HISTORY

Some history will help illustrate how tricky it's been for Ethical Culture to remain authentically and deeply both a religion and more than a religion. To make a firm break from traditional religions, our founder, Felix Adler, initially discarded from his faith many types of symbols, ceremonies and clerical roles found in traditional religions. Our "ministers" he called "Leaders." They spoke unadorned – no robes or stoles - in simple auditoriums.

During the 1920s when a religious awakening swept the United States, there was a subtle shift. Ethical Culture Leaders became less "teacher, scholar, critic, and prophet" and more a traditional minister who tended to "spiritual needs." Ethical Culture Leader Howard Radest said that, "Leaders assumed a pastoral image – the caring, nurturing, forgiving, supportive father" (Radest, *Common Ground*, 227).

Some became concerned about this shift. Felix Adler – wary of clerical dogmatism - noted a growing "dread of a new clergy" which he affirmed as "a very proper misgiving...because the world has suffered too much from priestly organizations, priestly arrogance" (Radest, *Common Ground*, 227).

Ethical Culture in Europe was more accepting of religious characteristics. Ethical Culture leadership in London was described as ministering "to the special needs of the bereaved, the sick, the morally perplexed, the tempted, the penitent, ..." (Percival Chubb in Radest, *Common Ground*, 227).

Stanton Coit of the Ethical Church in London saw ceremony, ritual and symbolism as necessary to fuel the growth of Ethical Culture. Coit thought that, "a rational religion should find a place for symbols" (Radest, *Common Ground*, 76.)

This debate heated up in U. S. in the 1950's when Ethical Culture struggled to define its identity and experimented more. Radest noticed "[h]ints of regressive trends [which] appeared as Philadelphia reported a ceremonial use of meditation and silence..." (Radest, *Common Ground*, 303). Shocking, isn't it!?

This reaction against ceremony seems almost absurd. In the case of Philadelphia an *absence* of ceremony in the form of silence was seen as *too much* ceremony. It reminds me of debates in a number of societies about whether candles are too "churchy" for our platforms. At AEU Summer School, we good-naturedly lampooned this in a satirical sketch where in a very formal ritual candles were lit and immediately blown out – a silly compromise to both sides of the debate.

As innocuous as candles or silence may seem to some, to others they were steps on a slippery slope toward unnecessary and distracting religiosity. The truce suggested in the AEU Concept map is that as long as ritual and aesthetics do not displace ethics as the core of Ethical Culture, they are acceptable developments that speak to a broader human experience (*Concept Map*, 21).

It may be to Ethical Culture's fault or credit, depending on your perspective, that it resists religious ritual and language. Probably due to both its roots in the freethought movement and Adler's courageous intellectual independence, Ethical Culture has not been easily pressured to try to broaden its appeal by becoming more like traditional religions. While I appreciate that we might reach more people and more parts of our selves with a little more music and candles, I am proud of our unique perspective and history.

### **On to THE FUNCTIONAL DEFINITION**

One particular moment in our history I often cite when explaining why Ethical Culture is "my religion." In 1957 the U. S. Court of Appeals heard the case *Washington Ethical Society v. District of Columbia*. The decision, written by Justice Warren Burger, unequivocally ruled that the Washington Ethical Society functioned like a church and thus was entitled to the same constitutional protections as other religions. Without judging the ideas of the society, the court ruled essentially that Ethical Societies were legally religious institutions based on a functional definition of religion – it is a "quack like a duck" standard.

The court noted that the Washington Ethical Society engaged in activities similar to other religious groups: weekly services, Sunday school, seasonal and life transition ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and community service projects. All these activities took place, as they do in churches, mosques and synagogues, within a congregational life.

From my perspective, this congregational focus around shared humanist values is what most clearly identifies Ethical Culture and many other humanist groups as religions. In the words of Unitarian Universalist Minister Bill Murray, "religious humanism emphasizes the importance of communities that affirm, support, and encourage these values through preaching, teaching, caring for one another, and deliberating life and life's passages together. Secular humanism does not" (Murray, 1).

The Court of Appeals reasoned that since the Washington Ethical Society acted like a religion, the court could not deny it the legal status of religion on doctrinal grounds (Ericson, 155). For the court, and for me, functionally, Ethical Culture is my religion.

The functional definition of Ethical Culture as a religion is supported by our institutional history. John Dewey in his book *A Common Faith* distinguishes between "religion" and "the religious." For Dewey, religions exist only as particular and historical. Ethical Culture is a particular, historical religion. The functional, historical, and institutional arguments for using the term religion in describing Ethical Culture convince me.

While this is sufficient reason to call Ethical Culture a religion, it may strike some as too exclusively academic. It doesn't address the more holistic aspects of religion that animate Ethical Culture in the lives of many – those characteristics that Dewey calls "the religious." He uses the term "religious" as an adjective describing experiences of harmony, wholeness, engagement, and more. Experiences come in many forms: aesthetic, scientific, moral, political, or social. For many such experiences matter more than

whether or not they use the term “religion.” In fact, Dewey urges us to free ourselves from religions so that we can better access the religious.

I won't go that far. Perhaps Dewey underestimated the uniqueness of Ethical Culture. After all, for many people Ethical Culture does nurture religious humanist experiences. Its pragmatic character avoids stifling dogma that corrupts some traditional religions. As Adler explained our modest claim: “In the past, they said, ‘I know the way.’ Today, we can only say, ‘I know the direction’” (*Our Part*, 77) Or, as another Ethical Culture historian said, “We cannot reach the stars; but we can steer by them” (Muzzy, 142).

The 2008 National Leaders Council statement echoes this in saying that Ethical Culture leaders are “inspired by the ideal of perfected living that always lies beyond our reach.” The statement is offered not as certain or static, but rather as “a living canon” that evolves along with us. Ethical Culture does not constrict, but rather opens up life.

### **On to THE RELIGIOUS IN ETHICAL CULTURE**

Turning to the more personal, for me Ethical Culture has opened experiences some would call religious in quality – experiences of humility, mystery, and sense of connection with something greater than myself. Some forms of these experiences I embrace more than others.

Regarding humility and mystery, for example, my skeptical personality is reassured when I experience them within humanism as simply a willingness to live with uncertainty. Leader of the St. Louis society years ago, W. L. Sheldon, sees the religious in Ethical Culture as helping us avoid “vulgar self-assurance.” For Sheldon, “Religion has always done its best work in checking the growth of this offensive quality of character...” It induces “sublime humility.” (W. L. Sheldon, “What Does it Mean to be Religious, and What is Religion?” as found in *Ethical Addresses*. First Series. Philadelphia: S. Burns Weston, 1895, p. 55). [Perhaps this is the biggest difference between Ethical Culture and the “angry atheists” who often seem so sure of themselves.]

Humanism at its best rejects easy answers. While reason and empirical evidence broadens our knowledge, we temper it with the Socratic wisdom that we know little. Even though our body of knowledge expands exponentially, paradoxically it is as if we know less and less about more and more. Humanism has outgrown the brash hubris that we can know all – it is more realistic about both its capabilities and the vastness of all existence.

This admission allows for an inspiring sense of mystery within humanism. As writer Chet Raymo puts it, we see “all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or will every have...as an island in the sea of mystery” (Murray, 19). As the island grows so too does the shoreline where the human mind touches mystery. Science does not exile our experience of mystery - it nurtures it. Those of you who read Carl Sagan understand this.

Science cannot predict all, and the future is still a great mystery. Adler saw possibilities in the future grander than human imagination. As he wrote in *Our Part in this World*, “The future is an inscrutable mystery, and the issues which it holds in its keeping are enveloped in silence. But it is not presumptuous nor vain to express one’s hopes for the future” (*Our Part*, 16). Ethical Culture and humanism in general, do allow for the mystery important to some.

Related to mystery is a sense of connection to something greater than one self that many interpret religiously. Adler experienced this connection through philosophical idealism, something that seems a bit weird to many of us today. He reached toward an ideal realm that he called the “supersensible” and “the ethical manifold.”

One reason why Adler did not call himself a humanist is that he thought humanism limited connection to these “something greater.” Adler criticized humanism for too rigidly ruling out the possibility of “the Godhead” or “the Divine Life.” (Olds, 179).

Adler also wanted to connect with a moral law he claimed operated in the universe in much the same way as physical law. At times he speaks as if the moral law actually exists in the universe independent of conscious beings.

The Ethical Culture I embrace – as well as most of you I venture to guess - has left behind the metaphysical idealism of Adler’s system. There is not enough evidence for me to accept such postulates as a godhead, the supersensible, or a universal ethical law independent of conscious beings. Today Ethical Culture reaches out to a more mundane, yet deeply important “something greater.” I will return to this something greater later on, but first I want to clarify a crucial idea.

### **On to THE PRIORITY OF ETHICS**

While Ethical Culture offers some of us experiences of humility, mystery, and connection to something greater, most in our movement are well aware of the emphasis we place on deed before creed. All the words we use to explain our beliefs are of secondary importance. As Thomas Jefferson said, “It is in our lives and not in our words that our religion must be read.”

I find psychotherapist Victor Frankel’s existential advice appropriate for Ethical Culture: “We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct” (Frankel, 122).

Well, I admit that I love talk. And I confess that I love debating about creed – but is it just a philosophical illness? Is Emerson right in calling creeds “a disease of the intellect” (Muzzy, 29)? Should we simply say that our movement is a “creedless religion” (Muzzy, 2)? I don’t believe so.

Should we abandon our efforts to explain how we are a religion in some ways and not in others? Again, I don't believe so. I think we can be *clearer* about Ethical Culture. I think Adler is clearest when he says, "The Ethical Movement is religious to those who are religiously-minded and to those who interpret its work religiously, and it is simply ethical to those who are not so minded" (*Our Part*, 68).

Let me explain how Ethical Culture can have religious elements but also be more than those religious through the following comparison. Ethical Culture is also an intellectual movement, but it is more than an intellectual movement. Let me explain.

I am the type of Ethical Culturist whose finds some fulfillment in the philosophical elements of our tradition. While Adler's speculative writings contribute to my moral life, some in Ethical Culture do not find that metaphysical speculation nurtures ethical living. Adler knew this. Adler "did not believe that for others such analysis was a necessary preparation or guide for living an ethical life" (Muzzy, 165).

While I don't think our intellectual tradition must be embraced by all Ethical Culturists, I do believe that it is an essential *part* of Ethical Culture that should be sustained by the movement as a whole. Ethical Culture has an intellectual history, *but it is more than an intellectual movement*.

Similarly, I am also the type of Ethical Culturist that finds fulfillment in some religious elements of our tradition. And similar to how I approach the intellectual element, I think that Ethical Culture is a religion, but *it is also more than a religion*. It is a way of living in which ethics matters more than any particular religion or any religious experience. Many in Ethical Culture who don't call it their religion are fully Ethical Culturists.

This is reinforced by Adler when he recalls the early days of Ethical Culture: "Now the daring thought that we had, in beginning the Ethical Movement, was to unite in one group, in one bond, those who had this religious feeling and those who simply cared for moral betterment. That has given a somewhat flickering meaning to the word 'religion' as we have used it..."

Adler continues: "Now I myself have always been a religious person in the second sense, and never merely a mere moralist. But I founded this society with the express purpose and intent that it should not consist only of those who stood as I did, who had the same religious feelings and needs, but that it should be open to all those who believed in moral betterment, because that is the point on which we all agree" (*Our Part*, 66-67).

The religious flame of Ethical Culture is essential for our movement. It's not essential to all individuals in Ethical Culture, but Ethical Culture would not be what it is without that unique religious element. Many find religious experience, sanctuary and sustenance in Ethical Culture that fuels their ethical deeds. This part of Ethical Culture enlivens religious humanism, and it deserves to grow and serve the world. We don't all have to agree to see Ethical Culture as a religion.

In the tradition of Adler, I say what is more important is where we agree. As I said, we generally agree about the importance of worth, justice, and relations. And I think most of us agree about the *conceptual priority of ethics as the heart of Ethical Culture*. Leader Joe Chuman writes, "... ethical commitment is primary in Ethical Culture; the beliefs you employ to arrive at your ethics are secondary and open to the free conscience of all who subscribe to it" (Joe Chuman, "Four Types of Religious Humanism"). We believe in deed before creed.

But we have a creed. A creed is simply a publically declared statement of values or beliefs. Adler consistently said "deed *before* creed," not "deed *without* creed." To condemn categorically any statement of belief that might be labeled as "creed" is not wise. The irony of becoming dogmatic about not having a creed so that we avoid dogma is obvious.

So when I use the term religion, I accept that we have a creed that evolves with dialogue and empathy. Ethical Culture has no dogma – no static set of laws one must mindlessly accept without question - but it is not a "creedless religion."

Again, the fact that our creed is evolving is an admission of intellectual humility – a confession of need constantly to investigate and learn. Robert Ingersoll explains the humility that distanced freethought from most religions: "We are not endeavoring to chain the future, but to free the present. We are not forging fetters for our children, but we are breaking those our fathers made for us. We are the advocates of inquiry, of investigation, and thought. This, of itself, is an admission that we are not perfectly satisfied with our conclusions. Philosophy has not the egotism of faith" (Jacoby, 173).

Similarly, Ethical Culture is not satisfied with our conclusions. We are not done thinking. Our creed is open to question and debate - a collection of beliefs and values, such as inherent worth and social justice, whose meaning can change as we learn and grow.

### **On to CONNECTION TO SOMETHING GREATER**

As I near the end of my talk, I now return to the question of connection with something greater than oneself. During the 1960's the popularity of theologian Paul Tillich greatly liberalized social understanding of religion. Tillich described religion as simply dedication to an "ultimate concern." The "supernatural" was no longer necessary. If one's ultimate concern is promoting socialism, for example, that could be one's religion. In some ways it mirrors Adler's words, "Religion in a broad sense may be taken to mean any cause in which we are supremely interested." (Our Part, 65-66).

For Adler, however, religion was more than that in his life. He continues, "But in its more special signification [religion] means a cosmic faith – not only the desire to improve conditions among men in this little human colony that dwells upon one of the smallest planets of the universe, but an outreaching toward the vast scheme of things – a cosmic sense, not only of mystery but of trust" (Our Part, 65-66).

As I shared before, however, I don't invest heavily in reaching out toward the "vast scheme of things" for ethical inspiration. People, here and now, offer me enough ethical inspiration.

But I'm uncomfortable with Tillich's approach for a different reason. I am concerned about the singularity of Tillich's term "ultimate concern." It implies a narrow dedication that I find unattractive in many religions. I step back when any proselytizer promotes a single simple answer.

After all, my life is full of *many* concerns: my marriage, my family, my profession, my health, my relationships with friends and strangers in need, and more. If I were to choose any one, or even any small collection, I deny the textured and complex multiplicity of life.

I know that Alder's concept of "the ethical manifold" is often interpreted as maintaining this multiplicity, and I support its metaphorical power as such. But "the manifold" is too singular, and too close to the language of traditional religions, for me to use it much.

I get closest to the "something greater" in my religious experience when I connect with, and to reach into, mystery by nurturing human relationships *in the particular*. Every human relationship is always in process; they evolve or they die. Beyond me, beyond my current experience, lie ever deeper and more meaningful relationships with those I have known all my life, with those I have yet to meet, and with each of you.

These relationships hold potential for bringing out our best. This is the heart of my religious faith. Some say that Ethical Culture is a religion of ethical relationships. That works for me.

Relationships come in many shapes and sizes, and each draws out different aspects of our personality. With everyone I meet, I nurture particular relationship based on our shared history and social context - this for me is like a "co-created religious experience." (Curt Collier) If we bring our whole self to a relationship, new and unanticipated aspects of our personality shine. In respecting our uniqueness, we remind each other of our indispensability and worth.

This expresses for me a valuable aspect of an existential perspective. Psychotherapist Victor Frankel stresses how his clients, when caught in dark moods and thoughts of suicide, need to be reminded that they matter, that the world would be worse off without their unique particular existence. He tells those doubting their own worth that their work could not be done by anyone else, "anymore than another person could ever take the place of [the mother or] the father in [their] child's affections." (Frankel, 126). Ethical Culture is a religion of many unique relationships with unique particular individuals. This is the "something greater" that inspires me.

To review, I argue that Ethical Culture is functionally, historically, and institutionally a religion. Ethical Culture has religious elements. Ethical Culture offers to some of its

members experiences of mystery, humility and connection to something greater. It provides for many – including myself – harmony, wholeness and engagement. These elements flow from tradition of many secular and religious streams – including humanism, freethought, Judaism, Christianity, and more.

Unlike with all the traditional religions and ancient myths that I though odd when I was a child, it is in Ethical Culture's nurturing these unique relationships today that my religious flame burns brightest. But my faith is more than this religious flame. For me, Ethical Culture is more than a religion – it is about living an ethical life, and you don't have to be religious to do that! It is my religion because it doesn't have to be yours. Ethical Culture is open to many because it as more than a religion. Thank you.