

Kindness is my religion

by Kaben Kramer

I grew up in what has now become Christian Nationalism in the agricultural heart of rural California. By every measure, we were an “all-American” family. My parents were generous and kind—and yet, punishment was severe, physical, and immediate. To the young child I was, this was merely the way the world operated: the performance of kindness combined with the reality of violence. Unconditional love was preached, conditional love was practiced.

I am no longer a child, and I am no longer of that religion. Yet, I remain very religious. Where dogma raises its head to tamp down curiosity, my life in every dimension is grown from the fertile soil of incessant curiosity. To organized religions, I either act the rebel or become supremely bored; there seems to be no soft middle for me to find a home.

Still, I persist in seeking a home in religion, because the cold wilderness of atheism, anarchism, and nihilism are more than my soul cares to bear. And I believe I have succeeded, though perhaps not in the sense I had initially set out. Such is often the case when curiosity leads the tether. Yes, I have indeed found a home inside of religion. And if you were to ask me, “What is the center of your religion?”

I would answer simply, in one word: “Kindness.”

And not the soft-bellied kind of kindness that gets weak in the knees at the first sign of trouble. Kindness is the center of my religion because it is the only thing that could emerge from my spirituality.

From the top, let two things be true:

1. Religion is the house that spirituality comes home to. *Religion is our embodied spirituality.*
2. If spirituality is the wind, religion is the sails. *Religion is our spirituality in action.*

From these two praxes let me build the case for kindness being a full religion, and not merely some lesser virtue in the thick texts of moralism.

Kindness and religion

Kindness as a religion presents all sorts of problems. First of all, “kindness” as we know it is indistinguishable from any milieu of positive virtues and is used in such a vast array of contexts as to nearly lose all contextual value. The muddled meaning of the word is only exacerbated by the sentimentality attached to its use. The cynic who has survived this world finds “kindness” too soft to gain any purchase; useless in the practical application of life’s demands.

To say “kindness” and mean it as religion is to commit to a way of seeing and acting that refuses both sentimentality and cynicism. It is a virtue ethics soaked in restorative justice and non-violent power, woven with three inseparable threads:

1. *Attention*, rooted in grace and intentionality
2. *Care*, centered on truth, boundaries, and dignity
3. *Action*, oriented toward the flourishing of all things

By religion I mean a community’s set practices (its shared rituals, symbols, stories, authorities, and aims) through which the community learns and sustains itself across time.

Seeds of beginning: attention and spiritual practice

Kindness begins with attention: the disciplined, unselfing gaze that looks at the world as it is. It holds space for the other to exist fully without trim or limit, and it gives attention to the soul of the other. In this sense, moral imagination and ethical treatment arrives before explanation; responsibility precedes rationale. Kindness starts at the level of attention and relation.

Attention toward the other with ignorance toward the self mutates into a performative shell, returning again to the model of my childhood: kindness outward, violence inward. The interior voice is often the harshest bully, and it would reduce kindness to a cheap trinket before the day is over. In this way, kindness must begin as a spiritual practice before it can hope to emerge as a viable religion.

The spiritual practice of kindness begins inside the self and is built on a set of repeatable structures that renew throughout the moments of life. The resilience of kindness, and its persistence to show up in all of life’s circumstances, can be measured and judged by the robustness of its practices. It is possible, perhaps necessary, to begin simply: the repeated phrases we speak to our own selves in the interior of our own mind.

Self-kindness is not self-indulgence; it can be maintenance for integrity. When the standard of kindness is inevitably missed, self-compassion holds steady, preventing a slide into self-contempt which so easily strangles the best laid intentions. Here kindness fights its most enduring battle and finds its greatest tools of vivacious capacity. To be kind to oneself is the constant laboratory of discovery, finding new pathways from the self outward.

These inner pathways carve the channels of traditions, doctrine, theology, and worldview. How we consciously or unconsciously form our interior relations determines the extent to which we can embody an honest outer life. Kindness begins with attention. The attention must cast a wide net, holding both our interiority and our externalities; both the gravity of our impact and the minuteness of our lives. Here, many religions begin to bifurcate and focus on the treatment of one over the other. Kindness threads it together as one.

Kindness as a religion holds capacity for complexity of uncertainty, simply because the outcome of this religion is so boringly simple: *to treat both the self and the other with kindness*. There is no effort made to entangle tiered doctrines, there is only swimming in the capacious waters of kindness.

Behavior, ethics, morality, and politics are all ultimately reduced to the interior question of, “What does kindness look like here?” and is first of all answered interiorly as well. From internal commitment springs community movement, as the question is held before the community and answered with concrete action. Imposing a strictly external answer by way of doctrine, while temporarily useful at times, ultimately weakens kindness once again into performance.

Kindness is not a mood. Practices shape character. The winds of spirituality are everpresent, and my habits are the rigging and sails which can catch it, transforming it from the cosmic intangible into the practical. This harnessing of energies, and the manner in which they are harnessed, directly determines the direction our response to life takes. Note that it does not change the circumstances of our life, merely our response to it. Thus, it defines our character.

Practice and emergence

And here we find kindness meeting from two directions. On the one hand, kindness is capacious attention, unburdened from structure or definition; it simply exists to be its own intimate answer. On the other hand, kindness serves as the antenna by which we become alerted to the self of the other. And yes, all of this is as simple as the smile to a stranger passing wordlessly at the train platform.

The spiritual practice of kindness is trainable. We become what we repeat. To rehearse kindness is to transform perception, increasingly opening ourselves to the world that lies beyond our sight and our skin. Attention widens and bias loosens; the urge to fix is replaced by the capacity to stay. Kindness, then, is more than just a virtue: it is a muscle to be strengthened.

And yet, overwhelming force is not needed for kindness to be victorious. Returning slightly more kindness than what was offered is all that is needed to tip the scales of the universe toward kindness at large. This is true toward the self as well as toward the other. To have prepared the practice of kindness, such that giving kindness is an authentic representation of self, is to shift the world toward a kinder future.

This allows for the tender attention to the other to be spontaneously met with kindness. It gives persistent and defined shape to our responses to confounding and difficult circumstances. The internal choice to *return more kindness than what was given* becomes the cosmic pivot from death to life. Authentic expression of this commitment is the moxie that makes kindness seem unkillable in even the darkest moments. These are sails that make kindness durable.

Observers and actors

We take in the ethereal spirituality, it flows through the structures and practices of kindness, and it comes out as religion. As we stand as antennas between two co-existing realities—the seen and the unseen—we find that life is very much beyond our control and also quite under our influence.

We are as much bewildered observers of our existence as we are active creators of it.

This tension is not a flaw; it is the field on which kindness takes form. Wonder keeps us soft to reality; responsibility keeps us answerable to it. The dance between awe and duty tears down the wall of performative religion. Both awe and duty are deep-seated responses to the world around us, and both shift us out of a placated neutral. Kindness is the unifying line where passivity learns to act boldly and a fragile ego learns to listen generously.

Living in a universe where so much lies not only beyond our control but also beyond our imagination is a continuous invitation to suspend judgement, expand our categorical bandwidth, and supply the kind of wide attention that naturally leads to wonder.

Yet, what we give attention to grows, which means there is a great deal under our control. Living in a world where so much is under our influence is a continuous invitation to duty, to shore up and promote a positive vision of the world.

Both awe and duty are emergent properties of kindness. This is not to presume we can judge someone's capacity to embody kindness by their sense of wonder or sense of responsibility. Rather, the spiritual practice of kindness naturally expands attention, which produces wonder. Likewise, as the communal self sees the other as part of the self, the needs of the other become the needs of the community—the very definition of duty.

Vernacular and connection

Religion's most powerful uniqueness is the bondedness of the human spirit to the anthology of a particular history. The vernacular of religious subculture is as spiritual as the rituals passed from generation to generation. Where moralism can replace doctrine, and ethics can replace dogma, religion holds a secret edge in the continuity of a single story across time and space.

As the spiritual practice of kindness opens the self to the soul of the other, wonder and duty come rushing in the gap, and with it, a deep sense of human connection across space and time. To bind up a wound is to participate in the human story; to bear witness to self is the seedbed of sentience, tracing to the very origins of the self.

Power, justice, and repair

There are also pre-emergent properties of kindness. Kindness exists only where love and trust are intertwined. Love without trust can turn intrusive or controlling. Trust without love can turn indifferent. Together they become a force: courage with a heart, steadiness with a soul.

This is not niceness or platitude, flowers at the graveside of activism. Boundaries, accountability, and truth-telling are not the enemies of kindness; they are its spine. Practically speaking, a team is kind when people can risk candor without fear. A family is kind when “no” is as honored as “yes.” A political system is kind when the vulnerable are protected and the powerful are answerable. In each case, kindness is not a posture of appeasement but rather the practice of truthful care.

When love and trust co-mingle, kindness finds ground in which to plant roots and grow. Kindness is love and trust put into action. Love and trust are quickly exploited by scrupulous men, yet they are never defeated. And so, kindness holds an enduring power, even in the most challenging environments.

Mature kindness learns to steward power as a means of service. It refuses humiliation as a tool and resists the shortcuts of vengeance, denying the narcotic of outrage. Kindness names harm done and pursues repair. Where possible, it pairs truth with pathways back. When necessary, it draws lines that guard the good.

In conflict, kindness imagines the social fabric as something to be rewoven, rejecting the false binary of a zero-sum result. Kindness holds the dichotomy in such a way that rather than extremes on a binary, a third way emerges.

This is the secret to kindness’s endurance: it is at once graciously soft and unyieldingly firm.

To kindness practiced as religion, there is no divide between these two. It knows the difference between forgiveness and permission, between welcome and lack of boundaries, between mercy and the refusal to name reality. It’s costly and asks for courage and patience. It asks the self to hold the dignity of the other in one hand and our shared accountability in the other, and to keep both hands open.

So love and trust are the wind. Kindness is the sail. I am the boat.

The communal shape

Kindness informs my worldview and shapes my sense of right and wrong. It tells me what to think about God. It guides me in how to act, who to befriend and who to avoid, and it crafts my politics. In every way that religion is the embodiment of spirituality, kindness is my religion as it is the embodiment of love and trust co-mingled.

Where much attention has been given to the inward gaze of kindness, to become more than personal moralism the spiritual practice of kindness must extend beyond the self to become community rhythms of being. To see the other as the self is by nature to de-center the ego.

Because kindness is public as well as personal, it must look at systems as much as it looks at conscience. What is rewarded, grows. Personal kindness becomes flaccid when divorced from holding systems to the central question of, “What does kindness look like here?” Communal responses will be many and varied; the role of kindness in the system is to ensure attention is given to the central question, rather than enforcing particular answers.

Kindness as a religion builds for inputs. Systems designed for candor, repair, and curiosity scale kindness to the whole. It becomes culture. The symbols and rituals of this type of religion find their center in nuance and ambiguity, in vernacular. The symbols, tools, and rituals of kindness are rooted in the contextual Now rather than the perceived fixedness of Then. The moral imagination of kindness is evergreen; the practice of kindness joins us with the long history of humankindness from time immemorial.

A community of kindness does not seek the imposition of rules or doctrines (outputs), but the practice of attention and care (inputs). It seeks flow, with love and trust as the motivating factors in shaping moral imagination; it finds, much to its own delight, that wonder and duty appear in surprising places, all over the place.

Conclusion

In the way that religion is the house spirituality comes home to: my spirituality is love and trust co-mingled, and it comes home to the warm house of kindness. In the way that religion is embodied spirituality: kindness is the sail to spirituality’s wind. In the way that religion is spirituality put into practice: as love and trust flow through me, they are expressed in the ordinary everyday activity of being kind, being fiercely kind always, toward myself and the other.

Kindness, as it has been described here, is strong and piercing—it is courageous exposure to our own souls and the soul of the world. Kindness opens us to the very fibers of existence, connects us to the whole universe of space and time, anchors us to our particular place and time, and is therefore true religion.

Kindness is a robust and complete religion. It holds the story of shared humanity, it holds the fragility and strength of the human condition, and it holds both myself and the other with such space and sturdiness that the daunting future begins to appear manageable, even hopeful. Kindness is my religion.

That is what I believe in.