

(Why) Do We Need Religion?

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Reading: Edwin H. Friedman, "Tradition," Friedman's Fables (New York: Guilford Publications, 1990) 195-204.

Sermon:

A friend of mine is the parent of teenagers. And yet she remembers vividly the day that she and her two children were riding along a rural road near where they live in North Georgia, and the younger one pointed out the window and asked, "Mom, what is that?" "It's a cemetery," she replied. "What's it for?"

It was at that moment, she says, that she realized why human beings created religion. More specifically, she said, why a *parent* created religion. We couldn't bear to tell our children that life just ended. We couldn't bear the thought that someday we would be without them. We needed better stories, better ways to understand our own mortality... and theirs.

This is a sermon about religion. Not about faith, not about spirituality, but about a human-made structure or system that we define as our "religion". Do we need such religion? And if so, why?

Among the many arguable characteristics that distinguish the human as unique among creatures in the animal world, I believe the most distinct is our awareness that we are going to die. We are mortal, and we know it. We know that we, and all those we love, are going to struggle, grow old (if we are so fortunate), and die. Guaranteed. Religion is, therefore, a uniquely human institution designed to ease the pain of that awareness, and to help make meaning of our limited time in this life as we know it.

In this way, religion is conscious and deliberate. It is that framework, that structure, that lens, through which one can better understand (and withstand) very human questions and dilemmas. Religion is a tradition of stories that attempt to enliven our sense about that which truly is beyond our grasp as human beings. Religion is teachings about the most effective and meaningful ways to be human... effective and meaningful ways to ease the mystifying unknowing and confusion and heartache that are inherent to our humanness. Sometimes those teachings include particular descriptions of the divine, of a creator God or gods. But not always.

Each of the world's religious traditions attempts to do the same thing through its lens—whether Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Zoroastrian, Rastafarian...

Each has its own rituals, its own myths, its own traditions, its own ways of being in community. Its teachings and prophets and ecclesiastical structure. Its unique ways of addressing the deep human dilemma of mortal existence.

And we have ours, too. We have our stories of prophets who have gone before us, guiding our way on a path of righteousness—of Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, a black woman and abolitionist who lived in the 1800s and wrote and spoke and taught about equality, race relations and community-building; of Michael Servetus, who lived in the 16th century, martyred for his convictions, for publicly opposing the orthodoxy and their narrow doctrines; of Olympia Brown, a perseverant suffragist and the first woman to be fully ordained and recognized as a minister by a denomination in America; of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing, who boldly encouraged their parishioners not to blindly follow the traditions of old, but to trust our experience of God and nature, to trust our reason and our insight in interpreting scripture and the religious traditions of our forebears; of Whitney M. Young, Jr., who fought in the 20th century for equal rights for black persons in America, for equality among all.

We have our stories, too, of Jesus of Nazareth, of Adam and Eve, of Mother Earth, of the Buddha and Moses and Mohammed. And we have our longstanding Unitarian Universalist traditions—practiced and reaffirmed in communities for hundreds of years—that have taught us there is meaning to be found, and Truth to be understood, through each of these stories and myths and lenses, made real by our individual and shared human experience.

Each of us has a spirit longing for something... something whole, something truthful, something beyond our understanding. Our spirit draws us to connect with that which is holy, to understand the magnificence of creation, and to make some sense of our place in, and our relationship to, that creation.

To effectively respond to the spirit's yearning, we need religion. Religion offers the guidance of prophets. Religion is the wisdom of time-honored teachings—lessons that have proven valuable and worthy over many years, in the living laboratory of the real world. Religion is grounded in tradition and historical experience.

One might follow one's own spirit, but the grounding of a religious tradition offers greater assurance that the spirit develops, and therefore flourishes, within a deep-rooted framework that is free of the sometimes misguided whims of an individual. A legitimate religious tradition seeks, and teaches, that the meaningful life is not to be understood by a single individual alone, but that individual needs the guidance and companionship of others who have shared, or are sharing the journey. Grounding in religious tradition

reassures us that we won't end up drinking Kool-Aid laced with poison simply because one person believed God told him so...

As our Unitarian Universalist prophet, Thomas Starr King, said:

We are not intended to be separate, private persons,
but rather fibres, fingers and limbs.
The aim of religion is not to perfect us as persons,
looking at each of us apart from others.
The creator does not propose to polish souls like so many pins —
each one dropping off clean and shiny,
with no more organic relations to each other
than pins of a card...
There can be no such thing as justice,
until [persons], in large masses,
are rightly related to each other... ¹

This conversation about religion—about *our* religion—is especially important this week after all the post-election news (news that may or may not be factually or interpretively accurate, but which has become the public discourse). This news informs us that the Presidential election was decided for the most part by persons who voted according to their moral values—values that they claim are grounded in their religion; values that drove millions of people, in voting to extend President Bush's term in office, to vote essentially against equal rights for homosexual citizens, against the right to safe abortions for American women, and against stem cell research... We're being told that many of those votes weren't about fiscal conservatism; they weren't about small government vs. big government; they weren't even about defense. They were about moral conservatism, which is being spun as religious conservatism.

So *especially* now, one might ask what our religious tradition—our *liberal* religious tradition—in particular demands of us. And the answer must start with our re-claiming the language that is framing the conversation beyond the walls of our congregation—language that limits moral values to conservative and sometimes bigoted moral values; language that limits religion to orthodoxy.

Maya Angelou has reflected on religion in this way; she says,

Many things continue to amaze me, even well into the sixth decade of my life. I'm startled or taken aback when people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians. My first response is the question, 'Already?' It seems to me a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian. I believe that is also true for the Buddhist, for the

¹ Arliss Ungar, , "Speaking Out for Justice: Words of the Rev. Thomas Starr King," June 2004 (UUA General Assembly, Long Beach, CA), 27 October 2004 <<http://www.sksm.edu/research/papers/speakingout.pdf>>, p. 8.

Muslim, for the Jainist, for the Jew, and for the Taoist who try to live their beliefs. The idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy.²

It is in the search itself, not in the orthodoxy, that one finds the ecstasy.

I heard a message loud and clear this week: We religious liberals need to step up to the plate and stop shying away from talking about our *religion* and our *moral values*... We must not only embrace, but *express*, our religious tradition that demands that we be *liberal*... broad-minded, open-hearted, ever seeking progress and growth and transformation. We have a message the world needs to hear—that though we seek to preserve that which is good and meaningful, we are an evolutionary species that must evolve in our faith, as well. That we mustn't resist change merely for the sake of tradition, that the spirit isn't nourished by dogma for dogma's sake. We must share our moral values—values that, as E.J. Dionne wrote in *The Washington Post* this week, “insist that social justice and inclusion are ‘moral values’ and that war and peace are ‘life issues’.”³ Moral values that affirm the interdependence of humanity and all life, demanding that we care for the less privileged among us. Moral values that promote love and commitment, and affirm that true love transcends gender, race, and outdated definitions of “family”. Moral values that are grounded in the lived, shared human experience, which has always been a source of religious truth.

Just yesterday I read the following words that were written by Kenneth Olliff, who is the editor of *The Journal of Liberal Religion*, and these were part of his Editor's Note:

The world has always been in crisis and will continue to be in the midst of crisis. The difference lies in us. In the midst of a tense and neurotic time, the question becomes what will we hold onto, what will ground our lives and determine our thoughts and actions. Liberal religion yields the democratic values of freedom, equality, and tolerance, and the theological affirmations of the sacred character of every human being and of creation itself—ideals certainly worthy of our aspiration, yet the power that they hold is only as great as the commitment that we bring to them.

The difference lies in us.⁴

These words may seem timely to you, as they do to me, but Ken Olliff wrote them nearly two years ago, in February of 2003. As with all truth, its value does not fade.

² Maya Angelou, as quoted in “The Community News,” the newsletter of the Community Church of New York, Unitarian Universalist, October 31, 2004.

³ E.J. Dionne, Jr., “...He Didn't Get,” *The Washington Post*, 5 November 2004, A25.

⁴ Kenneth A. Olliff, Editor's Note, *The Journal of Liberal Religion*, Winter 2003, 6 November 2004 <http://www.meadville.edu/editors_4_1.html>.

More than a hundred of you—adults and youth—are participating in I&U groups (our Small Group Ministry) this year, and at your next gatherings you'll be reflecting on the role religion has played in your own life. Think about what in your life has qualified as religious—what has helped you better understand, and withstand, your awareness of your own mortality. What systems and experiences have helped to alleviate the pain that comes with that awareness?

Do we need religion? Yes. And why do we need it? We need a means for understanding and withstanding the pain and suffering and mystery of human existence. Our minds and spirits—which are inseparable—are desperate for meaning and comfort. We need the tradition. We need the history. We need the cultural grounding. We need the encouragement to be humble, to be grateful. We need the hope that comes from knowing that this system has worked for millions of other equally as desperate human beings for thousands of years before us. Each of us is spiritually hungry, and we need more than temporal means of nourishment. The hunger is powerful, and it needs the guidance that religious tradition can bring. Without that guidance, saints are no different than madmen; peace is no different than calm.

In the reading earlier, Moses said, “as a leader I knew my people needed salvation...” Salvation not from eternal damnation on the lake of fire, but salvation from the human condition and the conscious certainty of death. My people need salvation—not through stubborn dogma, not through bigoted idolatry, not through tenacious commitment to orthodoxy, but through religion... meaningful myths and stories and teachings; helpful structures and rituals to connect us with one another and the divine; creative and comforting answers about what the cemetery is for.

My people need salvation. My people need religion.

Amen.