

What Does it Mean to Be Religious

-- and Are We?

April 27, 2014

Rev. Roger Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #305, “De Colores”; #102, “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah”; #298, “We Would be One.”

Special Music by Chanteuses: “Las Amarillas,” Stephen Hatfield, arranger; “Duo Seraphim” by Tomas del la Victoria

Shared Offering: [St. John’s Program for Real Change](#) (St. John’s Shelter for Women & Children)

Antiphonal Reading: [Sources of Our Living Tradition](#) (UUA Bylaws Section c-2.1)

Sermon:

A lot of Unitarian Universalist ministers take a lot of time among ourselves in discussing our identity as a religious movement, even debating it. The question is something like this: What is our theological center, our core, our foundation? Does Unitarian Universalism even have a theological center?

Some outside critics and observers do not think so. They say it’s too inclusive, too open to new beliefs, stories, and practices to keep its own theological center. Some critics think that this tradition of ours isn’t even a religion. I’ve even heard some Unitarian Universalists say this!

On the contrary, I say: our tradition merely changes as we embrace new people and ideas, as we draw a wider circle of inclusion, wrestling with unfamiliar words or new perspectives. Time and again, this tradition of ours has embraced novel ways of expressing itself. Our spiritual home is always changing. This tradition is an embracing faith.

To those who *still* say we’re not religious, I want to ask this: If we are not a religion, when did we stop being one? Let’s take a few glimpses of our history to see if we can nail that down.

In the late 1700s an untrained Christian preacher, Hosea Ballou, discovered and spread the good news of universal salvation—a message of divine love instead of a divine lottery of damnation. A loving God, like a loving parent, would not bring forth human lives only to torment some of them forever. As a religious motivation, Love is stronger than fear. Hosea Ballou established new churches on this faith and converted many existing congregations, wholesale, to universal salvation!

That was the beginning of Universalism in America. Or was it the beginning of the end? Was it a slippery slope to non-religion? After great growth in numbers during the nineteenth century, Universalism declined in size in North America. It may have been a victim of its own success—the success of its good news. As other mainstream, mainline denominations held back on the hellfire, and preached less judgment and more love, our message became less radical, less unique, less distinctive. But it remained a religious message: Love is stronger than fear.

By the 1950s, less than two hundred years after its emergence, Universalism had become smaller as a denomination, and it merged with the Unitarians in 1961. This is how we got such a long name: Unitarian Universalist.

Now to the first half of our name, the Unitarian side of our heritage. You could make the case that Ralph Waldo Emerson led the Unitarians out of the category of being a religion. Or you could say he exploded the common ideas of what it means to be religious. The son of a Unitarian minister, Emerson became a minister himself, in the 1830s. But in a few years he left the ministry. He said it was too stale and limited and limiting.

Along with his Transcendentalist friends, he wrote and spoke about a genuine spirituality beyond words and institutions. Transcendentalists like Emerson opened us to the wisdom to be found in religions other than Christianity and Judaism. Emerson wrote that a divine Spirit weaves through the natural world and through every person. He said it is a spirit to which we can open ourselves whether *or not* we go to church. The most notable sermon in our heritage was Emerson’s

address to graduating class of the Divinity School at Harvard, in 1838. Emerson dared to say, to these new ministers, that ministers should preach about real life, *not* about really old books.

Preach life as you live it!

The Harvard professors were Unitarian Christians, traditional ones, and they were outraged at such radical words. Reading copies of the sermon, many other Unitarian ministers near and far worried that Emerson had gone too far.

Even more, the conservative, orthodox ministers of those times took the opportunity to attack Unitarianism's credibility as a religion. The orthodox called Emerson's words as "the foulest atheism," and "the latest form of infidelity." Given this controversy, you could say that if we have lost our core identity, maybe it started with Emerson. Maybe he cut out our core, and threw it away—170 years ago!

But Unitarian Universalism is still here, and we are proud of Emerson. He had a major influence on American literature, philosophy, education, religion, and politics. Do you remember Congressman Dennis Kucinich of Ohio? Do you remember that in 2007, he campaigned for the Democratic presidential nomination? Of course, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama made short work of him in the primaries. But I remember hearing him in a Public Radio interview. Kucinich said he was proud of his populist economics, his plan for universal health care, and his pro-gay, pro-conservation and anti-war positions.

The interviewer challenged him: "Do you think you can get enough money to attract the attention you need to be credible?" In fact, Kucinich said, he had spoken to large, enthusiastic crowds when speaking around the country; so all he needed was for the media to cover those events.

"But don't you need to make your message less liberal to gain popularity" the reporter asked. "Don't your *advisors* tell you to soften the message?" Kucinich said [as I recall], "Well, one of my political advisors is Ralph Waldo Emerson. And in his essay 'Self Reliance,' Emerson says: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates

to that iron string." Kucinich went on to say he *trusts* his message *and* he trusts the values of the American people. He sees no reason to be someone he is not.

I still remember, listening to him brought tears to my eyes. If a politician who is not a UU can find in Emerson the inspiration to say what he thinks, then I want to keep claiming Emerson as part of this movement, as a religious movement. I don't think Emerson cut out our center, I think he deepened it.

By the 20th century, some Unitarians were leading a movement called religious humanism. In 1933 many of our ministers signed on to the Humanist Manifesto. This document was published as a magazine ad. (In these days, it would go viral on the Internet, but it was in a magazine and it spread far and wide). The Manifesto said that a religion *need not* have a supernatural base. It called on religion to embrace reason, science, and ethics. It said that Humanism's view of human nature was an optimistic one. Humanism is confidence in our potential for progress through education and science.

Many of the traditional Unitarians resisted humanism. They argued that the core of Unitarian values came from the Bible and the noble example of Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet, the human being. They feared that humanism would cut out that Unitarian core. In the 20th century we argued over the use of theistic language and metaphors in a denominational wrestling match that UU historians now call the "humanist-theist controversy."

Outside our congregations, in the secular world, the humanist movement would become antagonistic toward religion in general over the decades of the 20th century. But inside our faith tradition, the word *humanist* came to be used as a term for an atheist or agnostic Unitarian.

Did humanism take our center, our religious identity away from us? I don't think so. The humanist-theist controversy was a disagreement *not* about our where or what our center was, but about where our *boundaries* were.

How big shall we draw the circle to distinguish our faith, or how narrowly? Whom shall we welcome

inside the circle? Those were the real questions.

Our circle has expanded again and again. This has not weakened the core of our faith; it has enriched it. Our UU circle widens its embrace, but the core of this religion remains firm and clear. We are still a *religious* movement.

What is a religion anyway, and how do you know when you've spotted one? I've heard many definitions and opinions about this—from people who claim to be religious and those who say they're not. Sometimes their definitions have a judgmental tone—about other peoples' religions or about religion in general. In the nineteenth century some western scholars of religion looked at indigenous tribal cultures and said they had no religion at all. That's because the scholars didn't see anything that looked like *their idea* of a religion! By now the concept of religion and the study of it have become larger and richer--more complicated.

I would say that a religion is a set of beliefs or values, rituals or practices, and institutional structures. In each religion some of these elements are emphasized more than others. Every tradition has its own particular mix of beliefs or values, rituals or practices, and institutional structures. These components are inter-related with one another. Each element carries the others along: values, practices, and structures.

Let's consider the question of ritual. In the words of one religious encyclopedia, "Ritual is a language for saying things which are felt to be true and important but which are not [easily put in words or in] scientific terms." Ritual patterns convey depths of meaning which words can fail to express.

We do have rituals in this faith. For example, the structure and elements of a worship service make up a ritual in any tradition. If we left the lighting of the chalice out of the service, a number of people would notice. Some would say something. If we omitted the weekly offering, people would notice. They might not say anything, but they'd notice. Well, the ushers would say something, and the treasurer! Or imagine if we skipped the Christmas Eve Candlelight service one year. We'd probably hear about it. If we called it off, some people might show up anyway, out of habit, out of ritual.

Some rituals we now embrace come from the neo-pagan movement. The most recent phrase added to our denomination's list of the Sources of Our Living Tradition is this one: "Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

I was a delegate at the General Assembly where this change was originally proposed. At the Assembly, which is our UU family gathering, in small groups and large meetings, this proposed addition was both wrestled over and celebrated. It was revised and word-smithed. Debate centered on whether it would be going too far. Would we lose our identity? The world outside our walls didn't have good associations with the word *Pagan*, after all, and many of our own folks didn't yet understand it.

Some of the doubts came as questions: Weren't the other Sources on the list already broad enough to include earth-centered spirituality? Can't we just accept Paganism without an explicit reference? I was at the final debates and the final vote on this addition. I heard expressions of hope and concern, heartfelt words both *pro* and *con*. What swayed my vote was hearing passionate people witnessing to their participation as Unitarian Universalists AND to their spiritual identities as neo-pagans, Native Americans or members of other indigenous traditions, or as modern-day nature mystics like the old Transcendentalists.

I decided that I could not cast a vote that would say, you don't belong here, you don't fit. The vote was a close one, but the change did pass. That was 1995, and by now it seems like no big deal. Like all the other pivotal moments in our UU heritage, however, this change was not a foregone conclusion. It did not come easily, not without confusion, anxiety, hurtful words, apologies and forgiveness, and then moving forward, together.

When people in any religious community have strong disagreements with one another about their community's rituals, beliefs, values or structures they are validating that it has a religious identity. UUs have always disagreed about aspects of our identity. Identity matters...even if we don't agree on what it is. Such disagreements have taken

place within most of the world's religions—disputes can turn into splits, provoke reformations, and generate new schools of thought and practice. Some denominations divide over disagreements. A controversy can lead to the creation of new movements, new denominations.

In my understanding of our UU history, when Unitarian Universalists have brought into our UU circle an unfamiliar perspective, approach or style, there has been discomfort, but no split. Sometimes controversy, of course.

We wrestle. Unitarian Universalists wrestle over the boundaries of our faith—we've wrestled over Christianity, Transcendentalism, Humanism, Buddhism, and Neo-Paganism, and a recent resurgence of liberal theism. All these paths have become part of our faith communities, but not without with some struggles. We may at first resist the claim of an unfamiliar approach to be included among us, and we may *end up* including it. We don't split off into new denominations, we make room in this one.

So, what is the center of this one, this UU faith? As a movement we no longer have *one* theology—if we ever did. Nevertheless we do have a religious center. And what is that center? I hope you think about your answer to that question, and talk with one another about why you think that way.

Here's my take.

At the center of our tradition is a faith in the interdependent individual. This, I believe, is the core from which our aspirations and actions flow. It is the starting point of our faith, not its boundary. The circle of our tradition is not so rigid that it will not embrace people with new ideas and beliefs. The interdependent individual.

Every person is unique and unrepeatable, with dignity and worth. Each one has a measure of freedom, or should have freedom, to thrive and grow. To have a faith in the individual is to affirm the worth and dignity of every person.

At the same time, we are inter-connected. Everyone is held by a network of relationships. We are each embedded in the web of creation, not

separate from it, but embedded. For our existence and our enrichment, we depend on other people, other beings, the cosmos, and on a holy mystery that exists beyond our naming. We are dependent on generations of people before us who prepared the way. Each of us is responsible for using our freedom with mindfulness. Our actions affect the world—the world close by us, and the distant lands and people that we may never see.

We have a basic faith in the interdependent individual—everyone with dignity--every *one*, every being, connected to the rest of creation.

This tradition holds many ways of speaking about our lives and our purpose, our human nature, and the divine nature, and the mystery in which we live and move and have our being.

Our spiritual home is always changing. It changes as we enlarge the circle to embrace those who bring to us unfamiliar words and new ways of seeing, new ways of being religious.

This religious tradition of ours is an embracing faith, based on a faith in the interdependent individual. You and me, every person, together as members of the whole human family.

So may it be, and so may we live. Amen.

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Ministerial Benediction:

As you go out into the world, may you perceive with all your senses the blessings this world holds for your life. And may you know in your mind and soul the blessings you can bring to this world--by the way you live your life. —Roger Jones

“For all who see God,
may God go with you.
For all who embrace life,
may life return your affection.
For all who seek a right path,
may a way be found...
And the courage to take it,
step by step.” —Robert Mabry Doss

Source Consulted

“Religion,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., v. 12, p. 56.
“Ritual,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., v. 12, p. 65.