

First Unitarian Church

November 26, 2017

I'm going to start with a question for those of you who are regulars here:

Are we religious?

Is Unitarian Universalism a religion?

This is a church. It's called First Unitarian Church. And it's yours.

Does that make you religious?

I'm guessing many of you do not describe yourself that way. I'm an ordained minister and I rarely describe myself as a religious person, although I do think would be accurate to call me one.

The problem has to do with the connotation the word has picked up over the years.

"Religious" sounds like someone whose religion sets them apart from others, in worldview, and perhaps also in appearance and in practice. It reminds me of people I've known who, if you exchanged more than two words with them, were likely to start talking about God, and—too often, I'm afraid—felt the urgent need to convert others to their belief system.

Not everyone who is religious is pushy. Of course not. But that is one pretty strong connotation of religiousness here in the United States.

It has to do with the notion that to be religious is to accept a particular belief system— a set of creeds and authoritative church teachings—having to do with a supernatural God. In Unitarian Universalist churches, we do not have any creed, and although we teach values, there is not a set of official teachings that we expect you to receive as authoritative and final.

So if that's what being religious is, then we would have to say that Unitarian Universalism is not a religion.

And yet, religion is not as easy to define as that.

(You knew I wasn't going to let it go at that).

The Islamist scholar and religious historian William Graham, who was dean of Harvard Divinity School, once said that even he really isn't sure what a "religion" is.

In most of the world's languages there is no equivalent for what is called "religion" in the "western world." And here what I mean is the *dominant culture* of the western

world. “Deen” in Arabic is translated as “religion,” but that really just means “the right way,” and is more specific than the word “religion” in English. What is called religion here might be called Dharma in Buddhist countries. Dharma means the teachings... but then, what about the practices? And Buddhism does not include a supernatural God.

The mind and its thoughts or beliefs are a central concern of the Western world—think of the philosopher Descartes’ saying “I think therefore I am.” And so Christianity, which played a dominant role in the development of western thought, has come to be characterized mainly as the acceptance of a set of beliefs, a creed.

This very western notion that religion is primarily about beliefs has been taken for granted to the point that western thinkers assume all religions are the same way. Accordingly, some people have questioned whether Unitarian Universalism is a religion. Even some UU’s have raised this question.

But I remember the year I spent as a chaplaincy intern at Brigham and Womens Hospital in Boston, where there was a huge Catholic population. To my surprise, I quickly learned that when someone’s medical chart said, “Catholic,” I’d better listen carefully, because I could not necessarily predict their beliefs. I’ve met Catholics who believed in reincarnation, and others who were Universalists. I’ve accompanied more than one Catholic to an abortion.

These individuals did not agree with the official creed and doctrine of their church, and yet they still identified with it and people who knew them also still thought of them as Catholic. So obviously, there is more to religion than creeds. But how do we properly define it?

Some scholars, like Joseph Campbell, have noted that one possible root of the word “religion” is *ligare*, which means to bind or connect. And so re-*ligare*, religion, would be to re-connect or bind-back. That’s sounds like seeking to reconnect with the source of all being from which we were born, and that’s a beautiful idea.

But ultimately, linguists are skeptical about that. In the end, the roots are foggy, leaving us with a sense that the word gets at some important dimension of our humanness, but we are not sure what it is.

Perhaps the simplest way to speak of it is to say that there is more to life than meets the eye. What I mean is that we are more than objects. On the most scientific level, we are also phenomena—process and experiences. We think, imagine, remember, and love. And we make meaning. We are meaning-makers. In order to thrive, we need a sense of what our lives are for.

Sometimes we speak of this “more than meets the eye” as the *depth aspect* of life. That is what religion is about. And Unitarian Universalism is a religion. It might be that this makes you religious. I’ll let you be the judge of that. For now, I’m going to

turn from the question of are we a religion, to the question of what kind of religion we are.

Typically, for Unitarian Universalists, it feels easier to say what we *don't do or believe*, than to say what we believe, right? We don't have creeds; you don't have to commit to a certain set of unchanging beliefs in order to be a UU. We don't preach that people are going to hell. We don't proselytize. We don't think people have to become UUs in order to be saved.

Sometimes I've heard the history of Unitarian Universalism is told in a similar way. It's told in terms of all the things our religious ancestors rejected—like a parade of heresies! But I see it differently. So... imagine that I'm standing in front of a big chalkboard.

And across it, I'm going to draw a big wavy line. It's a timeline.

This is what one of my college professors used to do.

On the far right side, we have the present.

Backing up just a smidge, if you were here on March 6, 2011, and have an amazing memory, you'll recognize parts of today's sermon, which is adapted from the one I gave that day.

Moving backward through time, we have significant events in world thought, and especially in what is called Western Thought:

The Enlightenment. The Renaissance. Martin Luther and Protestantism—we just celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that last month. The dark ages. Early Christianity. The life of Jesus. The Axial Age, when Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Zarathustra, Plato, Socrates, and the prophets of the Hebrew bible all hit the world's stage within 600 years of each other, changing history forever.

And way over on the far left, we have "prehistory." Over on that left side, we have story, but not history. It's the time of the Garden of Eden, of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and people living 200 years and Greek gods and other gods coming right down onto the earth to manage human affairs. It's the time of the Enuma Elish—the Babylonian creation story. And the Epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian legend.

And even further out, just beyond the reach of most stories, humankind's birth. The birth of the first humans on the African continent, and those distant early generations. We don't know exactly at what point our ancestors began asking existential questions.

We do know that archeologists have discovered Neanderthal burial sites with precisely arranged tools, weapons, and other objects, not as though the person—er, Neanderthal—fell dead with them in hand, but as though others who cared about

him or her thoughtfully arranged them during some kind of burial ceremony. <sup>1</sup> It seems to suggest belief in an afterlife. Why else would you bury useful tools and special objects with the dead?

Neanderthals pre-dated humans. So we don't know when humans began thinking that there is more to life than meets the eye, but we can guess it was very, very early in the development of our species. When they noticed the solar and lunar cycles, and how death and life were interconnected—in the food chain, and in the forests. When they began to experience love and give it a name.

That's where the story of Unitarian Universalism begins. It's where the development of all faith and thought traditions begins, in the time of prehistory, of story, and of wondering about the source and meaning of life. Those early questions evolved into many traditions—some of them are depicted on our mural. They are all valuable.

Out of that beginning also came the stories and practices and ways of making meaning that would intertwine with the story and teachings of Jesus and be passed down and reinterpreted by each generation.

If you keep following the lines of thought and tradition—so many of them!-- eventually a few of them twist together to form one strong thread: Unitarian Universalism. One big-hearted, justice loving, diversity-embracing evolution of the meaning making that began way back here in prehistory.

Along the way, our UU threads weave through the history of Judaism and Christianity. Many people are surprised to learn in the first few hundred years after Jesus died, there was a lot of theological diversity among his followers. Not everyone agreed about the resurrection, or whether he was divine. Each of his disciples had heard him in their own way, and each carried his teachings forward with different angles. The stories about him that were eventually included in the biblical canon are, well, just the stories that were added to the canon. Many more were left out, some of which have been recovered and published in recent decades, like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

Eventually, a group of powerful men with powerful connections developed the Nicene creed.... a theology that involved, among other things, the idea of the trinity and the existence of heaven and hell.

Let us pause here to recognize that Unitarian Universalism challenges those points *by its very name*. Unitarianism is the idea that God, or our source, is one. Universalism is a belief that all will be reconciled with that source.

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<sup>1</sup> Newberg, Andrew B., Eugene G. D'Aquili, and Vince Rause. *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York: Ballantine, 2001. Print. (55)

UU's tend not to believe in a literal, physical place called hell. We do recognize that humans have found many ways to create hell on earth, sometimes for ourselves, and sometimes for each other.

If you want to describe our faith in its simplest terms, you could just use that: Unitarian Universalists believe that all people are from one source, and all will be reconciled with that source. But, we have a little more time, and I'll bet you're curious about how we got from there to here.

Our first notable ancestor after Jesus is Origen, a famous third century theologian from Alexandria, Egypt. When he was seventeen, Origen tried to become a martyr for Christianity, but his mother—who had also already lost Origen's father to martyrdom, and who had spent seventeen years raising this passionate boy of hers—had no intention of literally throwing all this effort to the lions and so she hid all his clothing so he couldn't leave the house.

Stuck at home with no pants and nothing but time for reflection on his hands, Origen ended up devoting his life to discovering Christian truth through the use of reason. And one of the things his reason led him to realize is that if God is good and is love, then no one is going to hell. So he became a Universalist. Our first Universalist ancestor.

About a century later, another Egyptian scholar, Arius, promoted a *Unitarian* theology that said God is one and Jesus was human. It seems like this could have caught on-- Trinitarian theologies are certainly trickier to explain. But the Trinitarians' efforts to counteract Arius were so effective, you can still hear the creeds they developed being recited in churches today. This is where the Nicene Creed came in. Some of you know the Apostles Creed that soon followed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy  
Ghost...*

Still, Arius's theology did not disappear.

Then there was Pelagius, an English monk, also of the fourth century, who believed in free will: the idea that humans have the wisdom and the power to choose between good and evil. Unfortunately, he was overshadowed by his contemporary, Augustine, who cooked up the doctrine of original sin that says humans are essentially bad.

In Origen, Arius, and Pelagius, we see early glimpses of what are now parts of Unitarian Universalism. That all are from one source, all are saved, and we have free will, are three ideas that persisted over the centuries and showed up in the lives of other UU heroes.

One was Michael Servetus, another teenager, this one not as easily thwarted as Origen. During the Reformation, Servetus noticed, as others would, that Jesus never spells out the trinity in the gospels. At the age of nineteen he told both the Catholic and newly established Protestant authorities, “Your Trinity is a product of subtlety and madness. The gospel knows nothing of it.” This was terrible timing—the Inquisition was still underway. John Calvin had him burned at the stake.

In sixteenth century Poland, there was Faustus Socinus, a trusted, maybe charismatic, Unitarian, who attracted some of the greatest minds of that time with his liberal, Unitarian theology. But he also got the attention of the authorities, who snuffed out the so-called Socinian controversy, as well as its instigator.

That same century in Transylvania, there was the Edict of Torda. Passed in 1598 by King John Sigismund, it was the first law of religious tolerance. UUs today attribute some famous words to this king’s court preacher, Francis David, who is quoted as saying, “We need not think alike to love alike.” He never said that, but we can.

There are still many Unitarian congregations in Transylvania today. January 13<sup>th</sup> is the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Edict of Torda, and I’ll be preaching about that soon after.

And now, as we watch these strands winding through history, we are getting closer to the present era. In eighteenth century England, Joseph Priestley, most famous as the scientist who discovered oxygen, was also a Unitarian minister. A brilliant man, he inspired quite a bit of growth in Unitarianism in England, which in turn inspired a mob to torch his home, library, and chapel. Narrowly escaping, he jumped on a ship to join his Unitarian friend Thomas Jefferson in the newly formed United States.

And around the same time, one of our most colorful UU ancestors, John Murray, also started out in England. Originally an outspoken fire-and-brimstone Christian, Murray was converted by reason to Universalism, and took up preaching it to others. You know by now that this will not end well. Murray lost his church along with almost all of his friends. His wife and only child died. After a stint in debtors prison, the devastated Murray fled to America. He vowed never to speak of Universalism again, so thoroughly had it cursed his existence.

But as Murray tells the story, God had other plans. His ship got stuck in a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey. Murray wandered on shore and met a man by the name of Thomas Potter who believed he had been instructed by God to build a chapel in the middle of nowhere. And he had built it. When he heard Murray had been a preacher in England, Potter felt certain Murray was the man God intended the chapel for. “The winds won’t loose your ship until you preach,” Potter told him. Remember, Murray had sworn off preaching. They left it to divine providence: if the winds had not changed by Sunday, Murray would preach. They didn’t change, and he went on to become known as the grandfather of American Universalism.

Meanwhile, American Unitarians were doing their own thing, though they were not yet called Unitarians. Instead, there was a handful of free thinking congregational ministers in New England whose love of reason gradually led them to question literal interpretations of the Bible, as well as the Puritan's Calvinism. Calvinists, you may know, believed in predestination: that God had already decided who was saved and who was damned. Since living an immoral life was a sure sign you were one of the damned, Calvinists tried to be good. Liberal ministers like William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, on the other hand, believed in free will, like Pelagius.

Soon, Emerson grew too radical for the Unitarians of his time, until they refused to let him preach in Unitarian churches anymore. He'd become a transcendentalist, along with the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott—father of Louisa May, who wrote the literary classic "Little Women." Transcendentalists found the divine through nature and direct experience more than through scripture. Eventually, other Unitarians also came to regard the Bible as just one sacred text among many— a widely misunderstood source of ancient wisdom but not literal authority— and we still feel that way today.

Christianity led to Unitarianism. Unitarianism led to Transcendentalism. And transcendentalism in turn, with its vague notions of the divine and its appreciation of nature, made way in our tradition for the humanist movement toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each of these changes was perceived as very radical when they happened.

Humanists attempted to reformulate liberal religion on completely rational, non-theistic grounds. This prompted other Unitarians to try to agree on a statement of belief, to reign in all this changing. A number of versions were suggested, many of which included God. Some ministers protested that without God or any shared belief, Unitarianism would cease to be a religion. But they didn't want a creed. They did value tolerance.

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, around the time the Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged, a rational, atheistic humanism had come to dominate most UU congregations in the western half of the US. The use of ritual faded away, there were no candles or prayers, and sermons were very intellectual. Churches were called congregations or fellowships, not churches. Reason and science were paramount, and the belief that humans were ultimately responsible for their own condition and the condition of the earth reinforced a strong commitment to social justice.

The social justice emphasis is gift from our humanist era that we should never forget. But from this period, we also learned that statements of disbelief can almost take on as much power as creeds. I was raised as a UU and learned religious tolerance in Sunday school along with diverse ideas about God. But as a young

person, I remember understanding that use of the word God among adults in my church was frowned upon, and invited criticism.

Gradually, ritual was reintroduced. UU women's groups had a lot to do with that.

And in the early 2000s, there was a push to re-embrace "language of reverence." To bring poetry and metaphor back into our religious services. And, to truly embrace the theological diversity within our congregations, in which for some people, the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder is a direct experience of God, while for others, it is a direct experience of life, of loveliness, of the Good.

In these distinct and weaving threads of history that come to make up our UU timeline, you see many of the stories and values that make up the Unitarian Universalist church as it is today.

Like Arius, UUs, on the main, believe all people are from the same source, are one family. Some call that God, others—like the humanists of the mid-twentieth century—feel it is better explained in natural or scientific terms. Some leave it undefined, and that is okay too.

Like Origin and John Murray, UUs tend to believe that all will be reconciled with that source. We are born from it, and we return to it. Maybe we are never as far from it as we think. And like Origin, we embrace the use of reason in the path of meaning and truth.

You will find that, like the Transcendentalists, UU churches draw much from the natural world and direct experience.

You will have noticed by now that I'm using a lot of "tend to's." That's because not all UUs believe the same things. We really don't have to think alike to love alike. You can disagree with me on theological points (or other points) and still be 100% Unitarian Universalist and a beloved member of this church. In fact, if you respectfully share a different view or information with me, I'll be glad for the chance to get to know you.

In the beginning, I pointed to the far left side of the timeline, and spoke of the ancient question "what does this mean?" That's one thing that has not changed, over many thousands of years. We still struggle, and wonder, and marvel at being alive.

Unitarian Universalism is a big embrace of that questioning and seeking. It is a living tradition, with roots as old as life itself, and ideas as new as the latest scientific discovery.

Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, I am glad you are here. Welcome.