

I'm Spiritual, Not Religious

Welcome to one of the most important Sundays of the year. Happy Easter and Blessed Passover, and a joyous Spring. We have gathered to celebrate a part of the heritage that informs our Unitarian Universalist movement—Christianity, Judaism, and Nature. Today's sermon is in three parts. The first part describes the place of religion in American life from a sociological perspective, the second part describes a distinction of spirituality from religion without privileging either, and the third puts Easter in the context of a spiritual resurrection.

The Pew Research Center estimates that in 2020, about 64% of Americans, including children, were Christian. People who were religiously unaffiliated accounted for some 30% of the population. Adherents of all other religions in America—including Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists—totaled about 6%. Pew researcher's projections to 2070 show Christians of all ages shrinking from 64% to nearly 35%. Over that same period, those with no religion would rise from the current 30% to somewhere between 34% and 52% of the U.S. population. (Pew Research Center, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America," 9-13-2022, pg.2). Religiously unaffiliated Americans are projected to approach or exceed Christianity and other religions in number by 2070.

The research center explained that "People may have beliefs about supernatural phenomena or participate in spiritual practices even if they do not consider themselves to belong to (or actively practice) a religion. Indeed, some people may reject religion—with its strong connotations of structure, tradition and organization—while still embracing spiritual beliefs. In the United States, nearly half of adults described themselves as *both* religious and spiritual, but a substantial (27%)—and rising—share of the public call themselves spiritual but not religious." (Pew Research Center, Attitudes toward spirituality and religion, May 29, 2018, pg.1)

Why on one of Christianity's holiest days, Easter, would I describe the significant disaffection occurring progressively, generation by generation, so that Christianity is on track to become a minority religion in the United States? Although many good people are Christians, the energy over-all is

low. The media reports much noise made by Christians about restricting abortion, discriminating against LGBTQ+ people, and censoring children's books while covering up the trauma of sexual predation by some Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist clergy. The Christianity of our day has become rigid and unresponsive to social change. This parallels how Judaism in Jesus' time and place was compressed into moralism. As Joseph Fletcher puts it in Situation Ethics:

Moralism makes the moral life a matter of petty disciplines; it condemns smoking, dancing, playing cards, Sunday fun, drinking any alcoholic beverages, kissing and petting, missing church, having sinful thoughts, and the like, but never shows much concern for great issues of love and justice, never makes significant or daring demands upon men of goodwill. . . .

[Fletcher continues] Jesus sarcastic remark [to the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees] about straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel fits moralism perfectly, as does his thrust at the Pharisaic opposition who paid tithes . . .but ignored the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:23-24).

Some people may re-invent Christianity in a new form, as has occasionally happened historically, or at least that was the thrust of several newspaper articles responding to the Pew Research results in February:

When it comes to the religious future, you should follow the social trends, but also always expect the unexpected—recognizing that every organized faith could disappear tomorrow and some spiritual encounter would resurrect religion soon enough.(Ross Douthat, "Predicting the Future of Religion," The New York Times, pg. 13.)

That sounds like a Christian being hopeful despite "the writing on the wall." A couple of decades back, Evangelical Christians were riding high, gaining members rapidly. According to New York Times articles, a third of Christian Evangelicals recently left their faith due to its political alliance with Donald Trump. This supports the division between religion and politics, as Alexis de Tocqueville

noted in 1835 in Democracy in America, that the separation of church and state supports religion per se by keeping it free of partisan political fickle fortunes. Or the U.S. may revert to when the American colonies were established, when few people attended any religious gathering. There are many possibilities.

Moralism is of concern to Unitarian Universalists because we have—along with only the Congregationalists—pioneered a sexuality curriculum that encourages people of all ages to know what they feel, consider what they want and how that matches with our highest values, and honor the vast spectrum of sexualities. IF we don't want to decline with other religions, we need to be very obviously different. We need to make our focus on the essence of “justice, mercy and faith” very obvious.

Now I will go to the second third of my sermon, in order to define the terms I am using. You will see in the last third how this hangs together . . . maybe.

“Spirituality” describes the characteristics of a WHOLE person's RELATIONSHIP to that which they consider to be SACRED, such as ultimate meaning, and values. William James referred to it as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their solitude . . .in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” He then explained this as covering a relationship with anything that is “godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not,” a “total reaction upon life . . .behind the foreground of existence.” We could spend a lifetime on defining the object of faith, but for a description of spirituality we need to transcend the abstract differences among Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, etc., and the differences within religions. Even atheists and agnostics have a spirituality, often holding sacred a value such as Truth, Love, an Ultimate Way of Being Ethical, or The Ability to Choose Freely from the Menu. Spirituality is the process of HOW one acts, feels, thinks, speaks—as WHOLE person—to one's self, neighbor, and the universe; it colors and screens perception of what one hears or sees.

Second, by contrast with the personal process—the HOW--of spirituality, religion is WHAT, or content. Religion comes from the Latin root meaning to bind humanity with a greater-than-human power. Religion refers to community

worship of the divine, the organized social and institutionalized structure in which particular forms of spirituality may be preserved and furthered through ritual or instruction. In sum, “religion refers to formal institutional contexts for spiritual beliefs and practices, and spirituality refers to the human experience of discovering meaning, purpose and morality.” (Katherine Grieg, “Integrating Religion and Spirituality into Counseling,” NetCE, Continuing Education: 2020-2021 Continuing Education for Social Work, pgs. 5-6) The personal/spiritual and institutional/religious are complementary but not identical.

When I used to present on spirituality and religion at social work schools, hospitals, and universities about how one would assess the spiritual development of clients, this distinction would drive some social workers and teachers angry bonkers. They couldn't or wouldn't say what their emotional distress was about, but as I mulled over what they said for its subtext, I think they considered it an attack on their deeply treasured ethnicity or family bonds. If one is spiritual but not religious, then Passover and Christmas, Ramadan and Buddha's Birthday, may become sweetly nostalgic but devoid of deep meaning. Yes, I was telling my audiences that a spirituality based solely on obligation was somewhat immature; that might have added to their distress. If one is spiritual but not religious, why would you attend clichéd religious rituals like Easter Sunday or family seasonal rituals like Passover instead of walking meditatively in the woods? That spirituality and religion can be conceptually separate does not mean that they exist without the other. Individual devotion to ultimate meaning and values is not **defined** by religion, but **informed** by religion. The inherited scriptures of many centuries contain insights and directives to guide individuals for greater spiritual depth and provide a check to spiritualities that can stray into irrationality and delusion. The effect of a congregation is to demand service, to demand values performance, and to demand that we pursue our spirituality with a combination of energy and reasonableness. It is still the responsibility of each individual to decide how they will express their deepest values. Spirituality and religion cannot be isolated from each other in practice but each may be evaluated separately for depth and comprehensiveness.

Now I will turn to the final third of this sermon, the lead-up to Easter. Jesus entered Jerusalem, riding a donkey, through one gate while Pilate—commander of the local Roman colonizers—entered through an opposite gate on a horse. This, for an embattled, oppressed people, was superb social positioning. Through demonstrating his identification with the downtrodden when He humbly entered Jerusalem, to celebrate Passover, he reached people’s hearts. Passover is a celebration of Jewish triumph over oppression, and contains within it the seeds of freedom for people everywhere. Passover is both supremely solemn and yet joyous in celebrating freedom. Jesus was faithful to the essence of Judaism but not to the constricting laws and customs of the official religion of his day that limited “justice, mercy, and faith” to channels prescribed by self-serving authorities. In modern terms, Jesus was spiritual, but not religious, as defined by those in charge of rules at the temple. Jesus’ great identification with the oppressed demonstrated that he was not about riches or status, but about compassion for the needy. Jesus entered Jerusalem and:

Then he went into the Temple and began driving out those who were selling. “According to scriptures,” he said, “*my house will be a house of prayer.* (referencing Isaiah and Jeremiah) But you, have turned it into a *robber’s den.*” (The Jerusalem Bible, Luke 19:45-46)

The contradiction between the Jesus that overturned the money-lenders’ tables and whipped people selling doves vs. his message of compassion is obvious. There are those who claim he was “perfect,” but this is an example of at least a lapse in empathy. No problem—if we seek a totally perfect guide to spirituality we will be looking forever.

The very next verse begins with the Rabbi Jesus occupying space in the temple:

He taught in the Temple every day. The chief priests and the scribes, with the support of the leading citizens, tried to do away with him, but they did not see how they could carry this out because the people as a whole hung on his words.” (The Jerusalem Bible, Luke: 19:47-48)

Jesus was not teaching butterflies and sunbeams; He was attacking people who thought they were superbly enlightened. He didn't show compassion for the scribes and Pharisees until later, but nobody's perfect.

While all the people were listening he said to the disciples, "Beware of the scribes who like to walk about in long robes and love to be greeted obsequiously in the market squares, to take the front seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets, who swallow the property of widows, while making a show of lengthy prayers. (Luke 20: 45-47)

Jesus knew he was offending the corrupt power structure of his time. He had repeatedly offended the moralism of his time by healing people on the Sabbath or touching the supposedly "unclean" and practicing compassion for the poor. The self-serving scribes and Pharisees failed to entrap him so they cobbled together an allegation that he fomented an insurrection and turned him over to the oppressing Romans. The local Romans were ruled by a commander who chose the politically expedient path and condemned him to die. No, the Jews did not kill Jesus. Corrupt politicians collaborated to kill Jesus in order to suppress his teachings about compassion for the poor, the hungry, and those who are sad.

The way the Easter story goes, he arose on the third day--which is central to the teachings of eminent Christian theologians--without their providing any consistent definitions of what the resurrection means. The text literally says that it was a bodily resurrection, but I believe that the resurrection of Jesus is best understood as the rebirth in anyone of "justice, mercy and faith." Resurrection is the rebirth within each of us of compassion. Resurrection is our knowing that there is hope reborn not just in Spring but daily, for freedom from want and discrimination. Resurrection is the continual reawakening of hope that those without enough to eat, without enough shelter, will be provided what they need.

This is the resurrection of hope that "justice, mercy and faith" may prevail—someday. Resurrection is the recognition that every human being has a naturally inborn faith in fairness and mercy. I saw a natural empathy bloom in my two little twin grandsons, sitting in their high chairs. One of them, Henry, was temperamentally fragile and would become upset easily. His brother, Preston,

would hand him a morsel of food or little piece of fruit. Henry was calmed not just by the food but also by empathy. That natural capacity for empathy resurrects hope in all of us.

Resurrection is what happened when a young girl in a poor small town, Ville Platte, Louisiana integrated a previously whites-only school. She was terrified every day when she walked to school accompanied by her minister. She broke down into tears on camera 40 years later recounting those fearful walks but she was encouraged unexpectedly when The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. phoned her. He had learned she was a mere child walking through a gauntlet of jeering and threatening adults, and said that he knew she was scared. King told her he knew what it was like to be scared, but whether he was killed or not he was committed to freedom and he thought she was too. That was the encouragement she needed and she persevered. Finally, her school was integrated; now she is on the school board and now the mayor is an African-American woman.

Thus, may we all rise again from despair. May we be reborn from the sadness of losing our building to reconstitute our community elsewhere. May we rise to the challenge of loving each other and the wider world despite the pandemic anxiety and depression. May we know what most needs doing, and do it. May we forgive ourselves for failing and forgive others, thus inviting them into community. So be it.