

What Is Religion? – and Why Bother?  
Rev. Dave Hunter  
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg  
December 13, 2015

“What Is Religion? – and Why Bother?” – that’s the title, the perhaps confusing, perhaps presumptuous title that I gave this morning’s message. My title poses two questions: first, what is religion? I’m not going to answer that. I don’t think I know the answer. Or maybe the answer is easy and obvious.

The second question – Why Bother? – Why bother with what? you may ask. I’m not sure. It could mean, why bother trying to answer the question, what is religion? – that’s a good question. Or it could mean, why bother with religion? – that’s another good question.

It would be tempting to put my lawyer’s hat back on. The First Amendment to the Constitution proclaims freedom of religion and prohibits the establishment of a state religion – and it leads to all kinds of difficult questions. It’s easier to write law school examination questions than to answer them. Religious groups have tax-exempt status, so is Scientology a religion? Why should we care? States generally have rules about who can officiate at weddings recognized by the state, usually authorizing, among others, members of the clergy. If you look at the weddings reported in the Sunday New York Times each week, they always identify the officiant. Quite often that person is a Universal Life minister, or, more specifically, as someone “who became a Universal Life minister for the event.” So those of us who earned a 90 credit master’s degree, completed a summer of clinical pastoral education and a year’s internship, and survived an oral examination have to compete for business with a mail-order minister? What sense does that make?

But, no, I’m not wearing my lawyer’s hat.

The word “religion” comes from the Latin *religiō*, which refers to the bond between us humans and the gods, and which probably comes from the Latin verb *religāre*, which means to bind back.

Does the Bible tell us what religion is? The Hebrew Bible, that is, the Old Testament, never once, in the translations I checked,<sup>1</sup> uses the word “religion.” In the New Testament, there aren’t more than a handful of instances of the word “religion” – and none at all in the four gospels or in the authentic letters of Paul.<sup>2</sup> The Greek word translated as “religion” is *threskeia*, which, in Greece, a few hundred years before the New Testament writers, meant fear of the gods or attention to proper ritual.

---

<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version and the King James Version.

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 26:5, James 1:26-27; see also Acts 25:19, Galatians 1:13-14, Colossians 2:18, 1 Timothy 3:16.

An interesting exercise for you to do when you have nothing better to do – and I suspect that you will always have something better to do – is to compare and contrast the following words: faith, holiness, magic, piety, religion, religiosity, reverence, sacred, spirituality, superstition, and worship. I've listed them in alphabetical order.

My topic today was inspired by a recent book, *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*, by the Columbia University philosophy professor, Philip Kitcher. The title summarizes the book quite well. He argues that what is left of religion, after we leave out the incredible parts, can be provided secularly. Kitcher, by the way, like me, studied philosophy at Princeton University (PhD 1974).

Religions, Kitcher explains, “are distinguished by their invocation of something beyond the mundane physical world, some ‘transcendent’ realm.” (page 3) What he has in mind, in particular, is God, or some divine entity, and some sort of survival after death. He concludes that “the processes that generate specific beliefs about the transcendent,” or we might say, the supernatural, “. . . are so unreliable that all of the conflicting specific religious doctrines are, almost certainly, false.” (page 19) Thus, no God, at least of the traditional sort; no heaven or hell, at least of the literal, survival after death sort.

The other half of religion is ethics, morality, how we should live. In religion, ethical rules come from God; ethical authority is God's authority. Kitcher here takes us back to Plato and Socrates.

If goodness is what the deity wills, [Kitcher writes,] does the goodness arise from the divine willing, or does the willing respond to the goodness? In the first case, the source of goodness is an arbitrary fiat; in the second, there is a source of goodness prior to and independent of the deity's will. (page 27)

Why would we accept an arbitrary fiat? I can't think of any reason. One might argue that God is perfectly good, and thus that what God wills has to be good. But why should we accept the idea that God is perfectly good? Take a look at the Bible. No perfectly good God there. Now one might respond that to the extent that the God of the Bible is less than perfectly good, it is because the human authors of the various books of the Bible have not accurately understood God. But then the question becomes, how does God communicate to us humans, and how do we tell what is truly from God and what has a less than divine source? You'll recall that someone claiming to be God instructed Abraham to kill, to murder, his son Isaac. How was Abraham to determine whether that voice he heard was really God's? It looks to me like we should look not to God, but to some other source, for our ethical rules. Are we left with nothing more than subjective attitudes? Does “thou shalt not kill” come down to “killing – ugh!”?

Kitcher's answer lies in the evolution of human civilization. Our morality has developed over the centuries. There is much that humanity, the overwhelming majority of us, agrees upon.

There are, of course, areas where different views are possible, and we should not presume that we will ever reach a complete and permanent ethical code. (chapter 2, “Values Vindicated”)

Questions about the transcendent or the supernatural and questions of ethics overlap when our subject is the afterlife, in particular, the problem of eternal punishment for human failings. “How could *finite* lives,” Kitcher asks, “no matter how blotted by appalling crimes, ever deserve *eternal* torment?” Our ordinary standards of justice condemn such disproportionate transcendent retribution. (p. 137)

While Kitcher would dispense with religion that is characterized by unsupportable factual claims and a fallacious approach to ethics, he leaves room for what he calls “refined religion.” With refined religion, practices and commitments are more important than doctrines about the transcendent; doctrinal statements are understood symbolically or metaphorically, and commitment is made to values more than to doctrinal statements. (pages 61-62) Doesn’t this sound to you like Unitarian Universalism? It does to me. Indeed, Kitcher mentions Unitarians as an example of refined religion. (page 122)

While he prefers refined religion to unrefined religion, his actual preference is to move beyond religion altogether. Here I would part company with him.

\* \* \*

Last weekend I was part of the chorus for two performances of Handel’s Messiah. More than 200 hundred of us were crowded onto risers in the chancel of the Wayne Presbyterian Church. I was in the middle of the next to the last row, with strong bass voices coming from behind me, with organ pipes on my left and on my right, letting out all the stops on the final Amen, with an orchestra in front, that made the conductor seem like he was half a football field away. I thought we had a full house on Saturday, but apparently Sunday’s crowd was even larger. The beautiful stained glass window at the back of the sanctuary was straight ahead of me. When the bass soloist sang “The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible,” the trumpet did sound, and if the dead could be raised, that pair, the bass and the trumpeter, they could have done it.

Earlier, the soprano soloist sang of the “shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.” Those shepherds had no idea that they were about to receive a visit from “the angel of the Lord.” Why did the angel visit the shepherds? you might ask. Why didn’t the angel visit the high priest, or the king? The shepherds were at the bottom of the social hierarchy – that was the point. Jesus was coming “to bring good news to the poor, . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 3:18-19) We in the chorus, “a multitude of the heavenly host,” you might say, then sang out for “peace on earth, good will toward men,” (Luke 2:13-14) and toward women and children, too, I’m sure was intended.

As the concert was about to begin, Sunday evening, a bass in the back row, who hadn't put away his phone yet, alerted us that, with less than a minute to play, the Eagles were still ahead of the Patriots. If the Eagles could hold on and win that game, that, surely, would be a miracle. And they did.

The hundreds of us filling that room, we had religion, we did religion. Could this have been done, could this experience have been equaled in an entirely secular setting? Perhaps, but I have my doubts. Could this have been done in a Unitarian Universalist church, with a 200-member chorus as a ministry of the church, with a powerful pipe organ? In theory, yes; in practice? I'd like to see it. Did my Messiah experience of the weekend draw me back to my Presbyterian roots? No. For me, there's no going back.

\* \* \*

Religion, and I'm thinking here of Christianity in particular, has traditionally given people hope that all will turn out well eventually. Either we can rely on God to guide humanity in a safe direction, or, at least, there will be that pie in the sky by and by, for most of us, anyway. Secular humanists, however, if they're rational, cannot have that same confidence. Can we Unitarian Universalists? "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." We've been told that many times. I think it's true: given enough time, humanity will get it right, and we'll create the kingdom of God here on earth; we'll have our city on the hill; we'll have the realm of peace, justice, and sustainability. But note that I said "given enough time." Do we have enough time? Fifty three years ago we came close to blowing ourselves up in a nuclear conflagration sparked by the Cuban missile crisis. Today, global warming threatens our future. Will we respond in time? Will our response be adequate? The future is not determined. This could go either way. (see pp. 133-36)

We all want to have meaningful lives, don't we? As UUs, we're in favor of "a free and responsible search for . . . meaning." But what makes a life meaningful? Who has a better chance of achieving a meaningful life – a traditional believer? a person of refined religious belief, such as one of us? or a secular humanist? If I knew the secret to achieving the meaningful life, I would certainly share it with you. Or perhaps I would save it for a best-selling book and make a fortune.

One candidate for a meaningful life is a life that goes on forever – a normal span of years here, and then life eternal up there. But if one's three score and ten aren't meaningful, will another 70 years help? Or another 70 after that? I don't see how. On the other hand, if one's three score and ten are meaningful, wouldn't continuation *ad infinitum* eventually drain the meaningfulness out of a life?

Another candidate for a meaningful life is a life that fulfills God's purpose for one's life. But how do I determine what God's purpose for my life is? And haven't we been told that God gave us the freedom – and the responsibility – to find our own path in life?

If I were to conclude that my life has been meaningful, is that conclusion subject to review? Can our own judgement about this be infallible? I shouldn't think so.

Is the meaningful life question a yes or no question? or can we have a percentage score? If you die young do you get an incomplete?

Kitcher concludes that “[l]ives matter when they touch others. . . . The meanings of lives are individual creations, products of people’s autonomous choices, but framed always by the core ethical ideal of other-directedness.” (p. 108)

But all this makes me wonder, how many people, UUs or not, actually search for meaning? I don't think I do. I'm too busy doing other things. From time to time I search for the right hymn to include in next week's service, or for last Sunday's New York Times Book Review, or for unsalted sunflower seeds, but I can't remember the last time I searched for meaning.

So my advice is, don't search for meaning, but strive to bless the world – there are many ways to do that – that would be the topic for another day. One's religion should provide a foundation, a guide, a refuge, in this project. For me, Unitarian Universalism does that.

A few minutes ago, we sang–

May I be filled with loving kindness, May I be well.  
May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be whole.

Let's look at the last of these prayers, “May I be whole.” Wholeness, integrity. Having a life of wholeness, having a life of integrity, of authenticity – these ideas should give us guidance as we follow the path of life. We should seek to avoid having a divided self, where we're a different person in different situations, with different people. Our religion should support us in this effort. Our religion should call us to task, should urge us to repent, to think again, when we stray from the norm of wholeness. As Parker Palmer reminds us, “We cannot embrace the challenge of wholeness all alone; we need trustworthy relationships, tenacious communities of support, if we are to sustain the journey toward an undivided life.”<sup>3</sup> I trust that that is what we can provide here, trustworthy relationships and a tenacious community of support.

You've probably heard the slogan that the purpose of religion is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. If you have to explain religion in eight words or less, can you come up with something better? Now, you could do both of these things, the comforting and the afflicting, with the promise of heaven and the threat of hell, but I think it would be more helpful

---

<sup>3</sup> *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (2004), p. 10.

– and more intellectually rigorous and honest – to keep the comforting and the afflicting here at home, in this world, not the next.

How do we comfort the afflicted? It depends, of course, on the situation. Be present, show that you care, give them your love, let them know that they're not forgotten, listen to them, pray with them. Don't make false promises; don't try to one up them with your story of affliction. Where possible, try to mitigate the affliction. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan. We're not told about what he said to the victimized traveler – we're told about what he did for that unfortunate person. And what one might do to help can range from calling 911 for the person in distress to lobbying for a single-payer health insurance system. By the way, it's a little known fact that the Good Samaritan was a Muslim.

Why would we want to afflict the comfortable? If you're comfortable, you haven't been paying attention to what's going on around us. Here's a quick list of what makes me very uncomfortable:

- Donald Trump and his plan for Muslims, and the crowds that cheer for Mr. Trump when he preaches his message of hate,
- the attack in San Bernardino, and other terrorist attacks, at home and abroad,
- the attacks on Planned Parenthood, most recently in Colorado Springs,
- the Supreme Court – they heard cases on Tuesday and Wednesday on the one person, one vote standard and on affirmative action – two more opportunities to move the law in the wrong direction,
- the November 2016 election and the various ways in which democracy in the United States is compromised and corrupted,
- the treatment of African Americans by the police,
- the damage to boys and young men resulting from football,
- and, last on my back-of-the-envelope list, but first in the threat it poses, global warming.

The list could be longer.

Our religion, our Unitarian Universalist religion, can provide us comfort; it can provide a foundation, a vantage point, for addressing, for confronting these problems; it can provide hope that some day all these problems, and others too, will be in our history, in our past, and that our descendants will live in a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8 etc.), with swords

beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3); it can remind us that no god will solve our problems for us, but that it is up to us to save our dear planet earth and all its inhabitants.

To sum up these various thoughts this morning, let me suggest that as long as we humans have religion, we need to have a liberal, refined version of religion. And as long as we have theologically or socially conservative religion, we especially need to have a liberal, refined version of religion. That liberal, refined version of religion, for me, is Unitarian Universalism. I think we'll need it for a very long time. Amen.