

## Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Religion”

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As befits a sermon on a serious and slightly discomfiting topic, I'd like to start with a joke. Well, a story anyway. A man is walking along and sees this guy on a bridge about to jump. The first man says, “Don't do it!” The second man says, “Nobody loves me.” The first man says, “God loves you. Do you believe in God?” The second man says, “Yes.” With this begins a round of questions and answers. First man: “Are you a Christian or a Jew?” Second man: “A Christian.” First man: “Me too! Protestant or Catholic?” Second man: “Protestant.” First man: “Me too! What franchise?” Second man: “Baptist.” First man: “Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?” Second man: “Northern Baptist.” First man: “Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?” Second man: “Northern Conservative Baptist.” First man: “Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?” Second man: “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.” First man: “Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?” Second man: “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.” And the first man said, “Die, heretic scum!” and pushed him off the bridge.

Today is the beginning of a series called “Words with Baggage.” Each sermon in the series will attempt to unpack a religion-related word that gives at least one member of the congregation the screaming heebie-jeebies. The point of the series is to give you all some tools with which to reclaim language that is troubling to some people for perfectly good reasons, but that need not be so disturbing if thought about differently. And what better word to start with than “religion” itself?

It's kind of odd. We come together not as members of the Pueblo Book of the Month Club or the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition but as members of a church, one congregation of many that identify with Unitarian Universalism, which is identified by most people as a “liberal religion.” So we are here participating in “religion,” even though some of us have trouble with that word. And if that's not bad enough, if we are participating in “religion” we must be “religious”, right? I'm a pretty serious Unitarian Universalist, and even I feel a little funny calling myself “religious.” So I would not be surprised if some of you shared my squeamishness.

Maybe we can start by generating a list of aspects of religion that we don't like, don't follow, or disapprove of. Here's my first pass:

- Religions require a personal God
- Religions require a creed based on specific beliefs
- Religions are invariably built on the assumption that they are the only true religion, the only right way, the only path to Heaven.
- Religions need new converts the way a vampire needs new blood and religions gain these converts by proselytizing, disrespectfully pushing themselves where they may not be wanted
- Religions are all corrupt and protect themselves at the expense of individuals who participate in them, as for example when abusive priests and ministers are simply moved to other locations rather than being disciplined

- Religions may intend to support peace but sooner or later all religion becomes violent when the clash of meaning systems morphs into the clash of communities or countries

So much for religion. What about religious people? Well, we may be less inclined to think of ourselves as religious if we think of religious people as arrogant, judgmental, fanatical, prejudiced, self-righteous, know-it-all, prim and prissy, socially conservative, racist, sexist, homophobic, anti-atheist, anti-science and in fact anti-intellectual, and far too entranced by the idea of those who reject their religion suffering eternal torment. The first man in the story above pretty much perfectly represents everything wrong with religious people: he claims that God loves the suicidal man but he eventually murders the guy because he belongs to the wrong religious council. This all sums up religion and religious people fairly well, right?

Well, here's the thing. That religion I described above? It's not religion per se. It's conservative Christianity. It's Wahhabist Islam. It's ultra-Orthodox Judaism, though only certain strands. It's nationalist Hinduism in India. It's not religion. And those traits of religious people I listed? Same deal. Liberal Christians, reform Jews, feminist Muslims and progressive Hindus strive to avoid many of the attributes we find most odious about conservative and fundamentalist religion just as we in this room strive to avoid them. The guy in the story is not just a religious guy, he's a fundamentalist Christian. And a pretty bad one at that, since one of the Ten Commandments says something about not killing.

Now, I could spend this entire sermon on the need to resist equating religion with harmful religion. But I'd rather point us in some positive directions instead. Let's start with the matter of where we get the word religion. It actually has many sources, some of which might not be of much help to us, but one possible etymology of the word has it deriving from an ancient phrase meaning "to reconnect." What do you think of that – religion as reconnection? Remember our words of welcome today: "may we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community, and to each other." Religion is about this knowing again that we are connected to each other and to the world beyond this room. Religion is about the practice of reconnection because we are imperfect human beings and if we practice we will get better and better at reconnection with all that is.

Of course, joining with others is not guaranteed to lead to good things for the individuals involved, or for the groups they join, or for society more generally. Religions can teach people terribly harmful things, things that will cause them to hate themselves or members of certain groups or everyone who does not belong to their religion. This is one of religion's most important dangers. But just because binding together can lead to great wrongs and even to the destruction of what we value doesn't mean that it needs to do so. Religion is simply our coming together. In doing so, we have some control over whether we strengthen our best selves or our worst selves. Religion does not automatically strengthen our worst selves. We can build a religion that does its best to support the strengthening of all that is good in us.

What, then, is religion at its heart? And why should we be happy to claim the label of religious people? Over the years, I have come to think of religion not just as a collective enterprise, which it surely is, but more importantly as a collective creative enterprise. Religion is about the making

of reality. When we engage in religion we make sense of our lives, we make friends, and we make a difference in the world. I'll reflect a bit on each of these in turn.

First, religion is about making sense of our lives. It is one of the places we turn to think about why things are the way they are, how we can live a good life and what we owe others, along with all the other questions that invite us into a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Religion is not the only place we ask and answer these questions, but it is important for meaning-making for two reasons. It's a place we come together in community specifically to struggle with life's challenges and celebrate its joys, rather than doing our making sense of the world only in the privacy of our own minds. And pretty much all of the other places where we gather have different primary tasks, such as doing our jobs or seeing our families.

We see this way of thinking about the importance of religion echoed in UU minister Marjorie Montgomery's chalice lighting of today: "Life is a gift for which we are grateful. We gather in community to celebrate the glories and the mysteries of this great gift." Unitarian Universalism does not impose creeds on anyone but we are willing to make some claims. We are, for the most part, comfortable agreeing that life is a gift for which we should be grateful and sometimes are grateful. And this claim has something basic to do with how we make sense of our lives. If, in our meaning-making, we start with the idea that life is a gift, we wind up somewhere other than where we would if we started with the idea that life is a curse or an obligation or a punishment or some gods enjoying themselves at our expense. If life is a gift, we should be grateful indeed, and we should find ways to live out our gratitude – in kindness to others, good work in the world, sharing our talents to bring others joy. But starting with the claim that life is a gift is not enough. It's too easy to forget our commitment to this idea when the many challenges of the days pile on. Where can we go to remember our commitment to gratitude, to reconnect with our commitment to gratitude? We can go to church. Here, in the company of others willing to strive for gratitude, we are reminded of our own commitments and we can reaffirm our intentions.

The idea that religion is an institution that helps us make sense of the world also emerges in our closing hymn. We sing "we would be one in searching for that meaning that binds our hearts and guides us on our way" and we sing of "pledg[ing] ourselves anew to that high cause of greater understanding of who we are and what in us is true." I've never met anyone who found those words objectionable. We do seek meaning. We do seek understanding of ourselves. And religion is a powerful place to bind together as one that the search may be richer and more joyful.

Today we read Ralph Waldo Emerson's short piece on why what we worship matters. We'll come back to the word "worship" a few services from now but for the moment listen again to this reading.

"A person will worship something. Have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

What Emerson is describing as worshipping is actually part of how we make sense of the world. When something dominates our imagination and our thoughts, when it determines our lives and

character, it is surely also playing an important role in how we understand the world and how we respond to that understanding. We are able to strengthen our best selves when we worship what is good – that is, when our imaginations, thoughts, lives and character are dominated by positive, joyous, humble, healing, grateful understandings of reality. If we become what we worship, we ought to worship that which is good and we can enrich our personal lives by doing this worshipping together. Religion affords us this opportunity.

I also suggested that part of the collective creative enterprise of religion is making friends. I do mean this literally, of course; we make friends with members of our congregations. But I also mean that a key part of religion is caring for one another or, as our closing hymn today puts it, “living for each other to show to all a new community.” Consider this church mission language, from a mainline Christian congregation I encountered years ago: “You will be cared for and at some point you will be expected to care for others.” I find this statement profound because it has described my life at my home church pretty accurately this summer.

In July we found out that our big old Golden Retriever Max had cancer. The initial prognosis, pre-surgery, was not good. Two days after we got the news I was in church waiting for the service to start. I must have looked pretty sad because a church friend came up to me and said, “How ya doin’?” And at that I simply started to cry. The love and concern in his statement enveloped me and made it safe for me to be vulnerable, as did the setting. I’m glad to say that Max is fine now, his cancer gone and not likely to come back as the initial prognosis was wrong about the type of cancer it was, but the more important point is that I was cared for in church. As I should have been.

And I’ve done my share of caring at my church this summer, not least because I am on the Pastoral Care Team and we have some people in difficult circumstances right now. The family with whom I am in the most direct contact has someone with cancer, and there are things I can do to care for them to the best of my ability. I can visit and be a non-anxious presence. I can listen when the spouse of the patient wants to talk. I can communicate messages to other people when appropriate. Mostly, I can convey the general feeling of concern for them that I feel and that the entire congregation feels. I have been cared for; now I am caring for others.

Finally, the collective creative enterprise of religion involves making a difference in the world. Blogger Tina Porter recently wrote the following: “I consider myself to be a religious person, one who can get behind the concept that a group of people can bind together to accomplish things that are good for the common purpose as well as for the individual.” If making meaning involves caring for ourselves individually and making friends involves caring for each other communally, making a difference in the world involves caring for society more broadly. Now, if you are used to thinking of religion as an institution that causes harm that the rest of us spend our time counteracting through, say, social justice work, it’s worth remembering that religion can be part of the solution as well as part of the problem. The civil rights movement provides one particular important example of this, but our own “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign falls even closer to home.

Religion is a surprisingly good locus of social justice work. Making a difference in the world requires collective vision and action, and religion can provide these. It is in a religious setting

that we affirm our oneness in “building for tomorrow a nobler world than we have known today.” Religion can be particularly good at “remind[ing] us of our highest aspirations and inspir[ing] us to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.” These ways of imagining collective vision can also happen outside of religion but religion’s reliance on particular kinds of aspirational language and the agreement of most people that matters of ethics belong within religion makes religion a natural point of entry into the collective vision part of social justice work. And religion’s rituals are a form of collective action that can translate rather easily to the public sphere, whether directly (such as a protest prayer during a sit-in) or indirectly (such as the hymnlike singing of protest songs during a march). Our religious values can lead us to do social justice work and can sustain us in the work.

Finally, the action of social justice work can be experienced through a religious lens. During the civil rights movement Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “When I marched in Selma I felt my legs were praying.” My interpretation of this powerful if somewhat odd quote is that any part of a life lived well, including social justice work, is a form of prayer. Now, we’ll talk about the word “prayer” in the months ahead but if we can live for the word for now, perhaps translating it as intentional relationship with the universe, Rabbi Heschel’s quote becomes quite poignant. In effect, he said two things. First, Heschel claimed that his activism on behalf of a powerful cause was part of his attempt to live a life at one with all that is. Second, Heschel suggested that in the carrying out of this activism he felt that reconnection, that rebinding, that is the power of religion at its best. The Selma march was not exactly the same thing as a worship service, but it was able to serve a similar function, not just because social justice work is a good thing but also because religion can be a good thing if done right.

My friends, may we strive for good discernment, that we may know the difference between good religion and bad religion and respond to them accordingly. May we avail ourselves of the gifts of religion, engaging it in order to better understand our lives, lift each other up, and bring some healing to the world. And may we always be ready to reconnect with that which is good in ourselves and in the world, for the bettering of our lives and the lives around us. Amen and blessed be.