

“A Vision, from Sea to Sea”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

It probably won't come as a surprise to hear me say
that I wonder, from time to time, just what religion is for.

What is the purpose of religion?
Why do people believe what they believe?

Why do people do certain things in the name of religion,
while refraining from or denying themselves other things?

What inspires people to devote their energy
and a portion of their resources to support and sustain it?

Why do people turn to religion to guide how they dress,
what they eat, and whether or when they have sex?

Just what is religion for?
Well, it is—and always has been—for many things.

Sometimes comforting,
sometimes confusing,
sometimes contradicting.

Religion is, I believe, inseparable from life itself.
The human condition seems to cry out for it.
I see it as our system for making meaning of the world around us.

Even those who deny being religious,
almost always have some elements of their day-to-day life
that end up looking an awful lot like religion.

That's even true here.

While some amongst us strongly resist the notion that Unitarianism is a religion, I respectfully beg to differ.

The etymology for the word religion comes from the Latin, *religare*.

It's similar to the word for ligament.

It means to bind back to.

It is like the connective tissue that binds bone to bone.

Religion is what binds us together.

It is what connects us—to each other, to the universe, to life itself.

The challenge, of course,

is that there are so many ways we can be connected, some more helpful, and healthy, and life-giving than others.

What many people conjure when they think of religion is a typically rigid system of belief that tells people what to do and what not to do.

There's usually some holy book full of rules at the centre of things, though not always.

Rules set up by or sent down from a distant deity.

And then there are teachers or holy men—and they're almost always men—who act as guides, or sometimes as enforcers.

For most of us, when we define religion, it involves the notion that to belong is to believe. To accept the rules and to be bound by them.

But, that's a very Western concept of religion. It's what a colleague of mine refers to as the "Protestant Lens," which has shaped so much of our thinking since the Reformation.¹

When we see religion from this perspective, we see books and beliefs.

¹ Thanks to Brian Carwana, of Encounter World Religions, for this insight.

Religion can be that, of course.
But many other religions are about doing, or about being.
Belief is often completely beside the point.
Many don't have holy books, per se.
And if they do, they may only be read by a tiny number of people.

What usually matters is how people spend their days.
What matters is how they behave.
What matters is the ability to cultivate certain habits,
to do certain things at an appointed time in a sanctioned way.

What matters maybe most of all is how religion helps people to explain the world
around them—and to get through life's challenges.

To understand the meaning of our lives.
To assign some greater purpose
to what it means to live and to die on this earth.

This summer I have wrestled with the question
of what religion is for, more than I usually do.

I thought about it while I was in Columbus, Ohio, in June,
attending the annual General Assembly
of the Unitarian Universalist Association,
where we spent a lot of time grappling with what role
we are called to play in the Movement for Black Lives.
Where we asked what action our religion asks of us.

I thought about it when I was in the Netherlands in July
for the biennial gathering of
the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists,
which drew people from six continents
seeking to understand what it is we hold in common
under the banner of this faith.
Where we asked what our connections ask of us.

And I thought about what religion is for
while I took part in an intensive tour, here in Toronto,
of many of the religions that are part of the fabric of our city.

I did it through a program called Encounter World Religions—

which is precisely what we did for seven straight days:
we encountered world religions, right here at home,
visiting Buddhist and Taoist and Hindu temples;
worshipping with Sikhs in a gurdwara, Jews in a synagogue,
and Muslims in a mosque.

Taking part in pagan rituals with a coven,
staring into the sacred fire of our local Zoroastrians,
and meeting with Rastifarians to learn
what their faith means to them beyond the stereotypes
of simply getting stoned and listening to Bob Marley.
(There's a lot more to it than that!)

I found this tour deeply moving,
and I'll never look at our city in the same way.

I can't recommend this program highly enough.
I know a few of you have been in it before.
I feel it should be a required course for everyone who lives in Toronto.

So much of what the world needs right now
is to be found in that one busy week,
trekking on a school bus from one sacred site to another.

I learned more about different religions in that single week
than I did in earning a degree in comparative religion from Harvard.
If only I had known that so many years ago...!

The great take-away from the week was this:
There are many ways to be religious.

There are many ways to understand what it means to be human,
to wrestle with what it means to be alive,
and be invited into the bittersweet bargain that is life on this planet.

That there is a need to behold the Other—
those who come at life's questions from a different angle,
with a holy curiosity and a commitment to compassion.

It's too often said that all religions teach essentially the same thing.
This is not really true.

Almost all religions teach some version of The Golden Rule.
But the purpose and the process behind each
can be and often is quite different.

Now, sitting with the question of what religion is for
invariably leads us to ask what our religion is for.

To ask what is our purpose.

To wonder what it is that we have to offer
in the broader human effort at meaning making.

This is a question several of us have worked to answer
over the last three years as part of our national body,
the Canadian Unitarian Council.

In May, in Vancouver, the delegates from our congregation,
joined by those from across the country,
came together in a large meeting room
to give voice to what we believe our religion is for.

It was actually the culmination of a three-year process
that was sparked, I'm happy to say,
by the Confluence Lecture I gave
at our national gathering in Calgary in 2013.

In that address, I pointed to the many ways religion is rapidly changing.

The church structures—physical and figurative—
that once dominated Canadian culture
and seemed destined to endure forever
have been greatly diminished from their former glory.

The historic, foundational faiths of this country—
the Anglicans, Catholics, and United Church—
are all in a serious to severe decline.

Increasingly, the religious landscape of Canada reflects
the diversity of backgrounds that now define us.

For much of the past half-century,
living into Trudeau's vision of a truly multicultural Canada,
religious identity was largely a personal, private concern.

As the country became more secular,
and moved away from the easy assumption
that most everyone was some type of Christian,
there seemed to be a tacit agreement
to not really delve too deeply into religious questions.

People mostly kept their religion to themselves.
Canada operated with a don't ask/don't tell policy
that, by most accounts, helped to tame public discourse
by smoothing away or even ignoring our differences.

But that agreement is being actively renegotiated today.

As Professor Paul Bramadat, from the University of Victoria, puts it,
we're shifting now into a very different phase in our national life.

Religious differences matter more and more.

Where they used to be glossed over or ignored,
they are now sometimes a source of open conflict,
as we debate what it means to accommodate or tolerate religious differences.

The rhetoric over the niqab in the last federal election is a sign of this.

We only need to look to France and Germany this week
to see how this is playing out in the uproar over so-called "birkinis,"
a cross between a burka and a bikini,
the new clothing choice of some Muslim women
to ensure modesty at the beach.

Suffice it to say, the uproar is about much more
than how much fabric is used in creating what these women wear.

It's about a society's capacity to deal with difference,
to balance individual choice and collective impact.

It's about whether we can overcome our fear of what is foreign to us.

Whether we can see the Other
without resorting to the often dangerous human inclination
of othering those who are different by judging them to be
wrong, or “less than,” or evil.

It’s not always easy to resist this urge.
But it’s of growing importance on this tiny planet of ours.

For much of our history, Unitarians have proudly championed
freedom, reason, and tolerance in religion.

We’ve held that religious belief should be a matter of personal conscience.

We’ve held that religion should be rational—
sometimes to the exclusion of any or all other ways of knowing.

And we’ve held that we must be accepting of differences,
even when we vehemently disagree.

While all of this still holds true, we are also changing.

Much of the energy behind upholding freedom, reason, and tolerance
concerns matters of belief.

We’ve very much been operating out of our Western Protestant Lens,
when we’ve articulated what our religion is for.

The shift we’re undertaking now, though, is a turn
toward seeing the world around us in a broader, more inclusive way—
and toward understanding our place within it
as calling us beyond heady questions of mere belief
to tangible action to build a better world.

Hear again the new vision statement:

As Canadian Unitarian Universalists,
we envision a world in which our interdependence
calls us to love and justice.

The crux of this new vision is the recognition

that our lives are bound up with all other life on this good green earth.

This is a bold theological statement of utmost importance.
And frankly, it's a turn away from the fierce individualism
that has at times dominated Unitarian discourse over the past two centuries.

It is an affirmation, in the deepest possible sense,
that what touches the life of one of us, affects us all.

When we take that to be true,
when we accept that as the central reality of our being,
when we truly know this in our bones,
we are called to a way of life that demands a great deal of us.

We are called to increase the sum total of love and justice on this earth—
not simply in some lofty, theoretical sense for people half a world away,
but in the very day-to-day moments of our lives:
in our city, at our work, on our block, in our homes, and within our hearts.

As Canadian Unitarian Universalists,
we envision a world in which our interdependence
calls us to love and justice.

It sounds so simple. It's just one sentence.

But it's what our religion is for.

Trying to live into it—faithfully—will keep us busy for a long time to come.

In truth, it is the work of generations,
each building upon the commitments of those who have gone before
in the sacred hope that we might bend
the long moral arc of the universe ever onward to justice.

To do this, our vision sets out our five aspirations.
The intention to be:

Deeply Connected,
Radically Inclusive,
Actively Engaged,
Theologically Alive,

and Spiritually Grounded.

Each of these warrants a sermon on its own—
and those will surely come in the fullness of time.

For now, a few words about each will have to suffice.

We aspire to be deeply connected—
to our sense of what is sacred, to each other, and to our wider communities.

We aspire to be radically inclusive—
welcoming all people, in the fullness of who they are,
on this journey with us.

We aspire to be actively engaged—
fully and heartily occupied with the work of love and justice before us.

We aspire to be theologically alive—
awake and open to new and deeper understanding of life's meaning.

And we aspire to be spiritually grounded—
firmly rooted in the sacred soil of life
that we might be nourished and strengthened
to take up our work in the world.

This summer, as part of my doctoral work,
I took a course called “Models of Contextual Theology.”

I know. I know. It sounds absolutely riveting, right?

The reading was a pretty hard, dense slog.
Our seminar discussions were at times far too theoretical for my tastes.

But the take-away was compelling, and it was this:
All theology is contextual.

In other words—what we believe and what we do,
all that we chalk up to religion
and our effort to make meaning of our life—is local.

Do we walk our talk?

Do we practice what we preach?

Do we live lives of integrity
that demonstrate what our religion is for?

May the answer this day and every day be a resounding “yes!”

May we live into the high calling of this new vision.

May our lives bear the signs of a people striving,
even when we stumble,
to bring more love and more justice into this world.

May it be so.

May it be so.

Amen.