

A Religion for the 21st Century: Relevant

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Islam is a very interesting religion. I don't mean from a strictly modern sociological point of view, although it is interesting there as well. No I mean from the perspective of the history of religion, Islam has some very creative interpretations of Western monotheism. One scholar described Islam as "God 3.0." First there was Judaism, then Christianity, and then Islam. The Quran, of course, argues that the same God is worshiped in all three but the version is improved over time. Obviously Christians and Jews beg to differ on that point, and for the record the Baha'i religion claims that they are God 4.0, so the game of divine one-upmanship can go on as long as you like. But it is worth pointing out that in this argument, Islam makes explicit a theme that lurks throughout the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament contains a number of books written or attributed to various prophets. These prophets come on the scene at various times in the history of Israel and come with a message for a very specific context. It starts with Abraham forging a special relationship

with God called the covenant. Moses comes to bring the law. Noah renews the covenant with God. David establishes a kingdom. Hosea and Jeremiah warn against infidelity to God. Portions of Isaiah describe the healing of Israel's return from exile, and so on. For Christians, Jesus brings another renewal of the covenant. He is continuous with those other guys, Matthew goes so far as to lay out his genealogy to show that Jesus is a descendant of David, but Jesus is changing the game too. Islam agrees with all of that, sans the son of God stuff, and claims Mohammad as the last prophet and messenger of God. There is a subtle yet important difference between prophets and messengers. Prophets bring back the old message the people have heard before but need to hear again in a new time and place in history. Messengers bring a whole new teaching from God. But in both cases, Divine truth is intended for a very specific time and place; a context in which the truth can be heard, understood, and lived out. God sends prophets and messengers, according to our reading from the Quran this morning, in order to keep the message relevant for a new age.

Relevance is an important principle in religion. Religion, if it is to be anything more than a fancy ritual and nice words on a Sunday morning, must be relevant to people's lives or it is useless. For Unitarian Universalism or any religion to survive into the 21st century, it must seek to connect to people where they are in a meaningful way. It must address the questions and struggles of that particular age or risk

extinction. As the UUA Moderator Gini Courter once put it in a speech to church leaders, “If you don’t like change, you are going to like irrelevance even less!” So there is a lot at stake here.

How do we become relevant for the 21st century? First let me put your mind at ease that I will not be making any grand predictions about what the rest of the century will look like. These things are impossible to know. Technology happens so fast, perhaps in the future I will just type up my sermon at home and it will be downloaded directly into your mind through some direct feed into our brains. I don’t know. But I do know *people*, and that gives me a good sense as to what religion will have to do for *people* in the 21st century.

I think Unitarian Universalism is at its best when it asks us to be honest with ourselves about who we are. Ours is a religion whose central practice is one of self-authenticity. There is no external creed one must adhere to, there is only the inner compulsion to truth, beauty, and goodness that urges and persuades us to create a life that is rich, meaningful, and touches the lives of others in deep and intimate ways. It is a compulsion that revels in mystery and does not rush too soon for the quick fix or for the final answer. I have seen this side of Unitarian Universalism practiced here and elsewhere. But we only get there when we are willing to go deep, to risk some vulnerability with other people, and to not run away when they share at that deep level with us. Honesty is the key here.

My friend Marlin Lavanhar, the Senior Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa Oklahoma, has a great metaphor for this. Marlin says that all of us are like your favorite room in your house; think of a den or a living room where guests are entertained. One side of this room is our wall of fame. Here we hang all of the ribbons and trophies we have won, the diplomas and jobs we have earned, or perhaps pictures of places we have been to and are proud of. Maybe even the odd celebrity autograph. It is a wall of pride, and when guests arrive, this is the first place we take them. The wall of fame is that part of ourselves we show people when we first meet them. I have this job, and I went to this school, and these are my awesome children.

But there is another side of that room, Marlin teaches us. That is the wall of shame. The wall of shame has on it all of the things we are ashamed of, obviously, but it is more than simply shame there. On this wall hangs all of our disappointments, our heartbreaks, and moments of humiliation and embarrassment. This is where we hang our pain and suffering. Some of the things on this wall have been there for years. We rarely look at this wall, and we almost never bring people to visit.

The wall of shame is where we go when we are truly honest with ourselves. Mostly we don't look at it until something awful happens to us, or an experience reminds us of what is on that wall. We don't go to the wall of shame unless it is to hang some new pain or injury on it! We should not kid ourselves: all of us have a wall of shame. Everyone at

some point knows heartbreak and disappointment and regret. But those things have power over your life only when you ignore them. If we could somehow be willing to go deeper, to look at those unpleasant things, maybe even name them in front of some other people whom we trust in a safe environment, then perhaps that wall of shame would lose some of its power, and we would be free to form real and lasting relationships. Perhaps even the Beloved Community.

When I first heard Marlin talking about the wall of fame and the wall of shame, I thought immediately of my old friend Chad. Now when I say old friend, I mean it: Chad and I went to Middle School and High School together. Chad was the big man on campus in my high school. The son of a prominent lawyer in town, he was handsome, smart, athletic, rich and charming. He was the valedictorian, captain of the swim team, a talented singer and guitarist, he dated the prettiest and most popular girls in the class, and was friends with everyone; students and teacher alike. I believe he was the President of our class, and went to college on a full ride scholarship. If this sounds like some sort of stereotype or extreme hyperbole, trust me, I wish I were making some of this up. But it's all true; I consulted my old yearbook! A quick search on Facebook reveals that he is now a musician, which if my memory serves, was what he said he wanted to be back in high school.

I think about my friend Chad every once and awhile. He is my friend, or was; like I say he was friends with everybody. His wall of

fame is impressive, and for all I know it has grown and expanded to a scale I cannot even imagine. But I am a firm believer that Marlin is right: even the great Chad has a wall of shame somewhere. He and I are the same age, and you don't walk around on this planet for nearly four decades without some tough stuff happening to you. That is just life and how things work. I can imagine some of what might be up there on his wall of shame, but that would not do Chad justice. The best I could tell that Facebook would reveal was that he had a bad haircut in some of the pictures. While we were friends I can't say we were close confidants. I would guess he was with some people but not me. I never saw his wall of shame, although I am guessing someone has. Wouldn't it be a good thing to have had the opportunity to have really heard what Chad's insecurities were. To have known about a moment when he was less than fully confident in himself; which is how he appeared to the outside world. I would have liked to know that not to gloat at his misfortune or celebrate over his failure. That would be to take a sharp stick at his vulnerable places. No I wish I could have heard some of those stories because it would have made him human in my mind. It would have been the start of some real and meaningful connection that we could have shared as true friends. Perhaps given the right set of circumstances for both of us to feel safe, and trust each other, we might have been that vulnerable with one another.

Religion, and specifically Unitarian Universalism, is at its best when it creates a space, a place, a container if you will, for exactly that kind of relationship to develop. Unitarian Universalism will become a relevant religion of the 21st century when it helps people go deeper with themselves and with others. When we are able to get past judging, comparing, and being competitive, then we have arrived at spiritual maturity. This is the kind of meaning and community that everyone is hungry for, and a relevant religion for the 21st century is able to feed that hunger. This is why we have Open Circles and other small group programs: they create the kind of safe space that makes it possible for us to go from showing each other our wall of fame to risking a quick glance perhaps at our wall of shame. That is when Unitarian Universalism has called us to our most authentic self.

Although he takes a different path to get there, this is in essence Peter Morales' point in our modern reading today. If religion is simply about beliefs then it becomes a rather shallow thing. If that were true then going to church would be no better than taking an amateur philosophy class once a week. Religion is more than a set of ideas we agree with or disagree with. Granted that agreement and disagreement can get pretty heated and has started more than one holy war throughout history, but that is not the whole story, Morales reminds us. To go beyond belief is to take religion to the next level. A religion for the 21st century reveals the truth not just for our intellectual satisfaction, but also

so that we can live a life more in tune to our values. It is a life lived in pursuit of a grander purpose than our individual ego. To discover that truth, and to be able to apply it, is a lifelong process and it is unique to each and every one of us. The genius of Unitarian Universalism, in my opinion, is acknowledging that the saving, life-giving truth revealed to us by the Holy, from prophets and messengers or just from ordinary folks, is not the same for everyone. And because it is not the same, we need another prophet or messenger or moment of enlightenment to remind us of it again in a new time and place. And so onward the living tradition marches.

For Unitarian Universalism to be relevant in the 21st century it has to have some of this life-giving truth for us not just when we are looking at the wall of fame and showing off our peacock feathers to each other, but also for that dark night of the soul when we are staring hard at that wall of shame. It is a truth that is the middle way between full blown original sin which would say, in the words of John Calvin, that we are no better than five foot long worms in the eyes of God. And it would also take into account Emerson's rosy overcorrection to Calvin, which only praised the higher faculties of humans and never went into the pain and suffering of human life. By the way, Emerson had a big wall of shame: his first wife died very unexpectedly and he would often visit her grave. Yet none of that pain or reflection on loss makes it into his writings. Oh that we had something in the middle that affirmed the

inherent worth and dignity for all human beings in the world while not claiming that we are some sort of invulnerable perfected animal that we obviously are not. To proclaim that truth would make us relevant to the 21st century.

I want to close this morning with a brief summary of all three of the pieces of my sermon series this month. I said that the religion of the 21st century must be joyful, transformative, and relevant. Actually it has to be a lot more than those three things, but they are as good as any to raise up. Joy speaks to our very real need to connect with life and with other people. We need to be able to experience ourselves in tune with the world. We need to know we have a place somewhere and to know where that somewhere is exactly. Transformative is in some ways the opposite of the first, but they are compatible. A transformative religion does not merely stay at the stage of finding and reveling in personal joy. Transformative religion seeks to courageously speak out against justice and actively do something about it whenever possible. Transformative religion is based on a clear vision of the world as it should be as opposed to the world as it is.

And finally there is the relevant religion of the 21st century. This is the result of the previous two. If we give people joy, and the ability to make a meaningful impact in the world, then of course we will be relevant. There is much hand ringing that goes on in our faith, and particularly in other mainline denominations, about growth. Everyone

wants to grow, to have more money, more members, more staff, bigger buildings, and better seminaries. In my line of work we call this “steeple envy”, and even casual students of Freud can probably guess why. But growth for its own sake is shallow. Plants often grow toward sunlight, and sunflowers are famous for following the sun as it goes through the sky. This is a key principle: growth comes when we have something to grow toward. When there is some depth of purpose such as joy, transformation, and relevance, then Unitarian Universalism, and First Unitarian Church, will flourish as it has never flourished before. May this century contain within it the best that we have ever known in our history. For one day they will look back at us and say, “They did it.” Amen Blessed Be.