

Belief as the Enemy of Religion

It wasn't until I set out to track down an old joke as a lead-in to this sermon that I learned that there is actually a comedic category for "Best God Joke Ever." It was so designated by an on line magazine called Ship of Fools, which is a liberal Christian outfit that pokes light hearted fun at some of the more extreme versions of Christianity and religion.

This is not so much of a joke as it is a riff from a stand-up comedy routine originally done by a Chicago based comedian named Eno Phillips sometime back in the early 1980s. So here goes my attempt at stand-up using Mr. Phillips' material:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I ran up and said to him, "Don't do it!"

He said, "But I've nothing to live for because nobody loves me."

I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes, I do."

I said, "Me too. Are you a Christian, a Jew, or a Muslim?"

He said, "I'm a Christian."

I said, "Me too! Which denomination?"

He said, "Baptist."

I said, "Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist."

I said, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

I said, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region."

I said, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

At that I said, "Die you heretic!"

Well, I got a kick out of it. Like most good comedy, or satire, this shtick has an edge or a bite to it; this one having to do with the absurd lengths to which matters of religious belief can be taken. The not so humorous part is that over the course of human history--particularly in the West--persons have

been persecuted, tortured, and even put to death over lesser, or finer, points of theology and belief than what is contained in this fanciful and comedic routine. So I'll use this Eno Phillips bit as my entrée to say a little about what I have come to see as the difference between religion and belief.

To state my premise at the outset: I happen to think that human beings are innately religious. Whether we call it that or not, we all carry within us a religious impulse. I'll enlarge on this point a little later. My follow-up point is that it's an insistence upon a very constricted kind of belief that does the most damage to this religious impulse. Or, as the President of our UU Association, Rev. Peter Morales, put it in an essay which ran in one of our denominational publications some years ago, belief is the *enemy* of religion. Rev. Morales' sermon really was quite brilliant--quite brilliant, that is to say, because I agreed with practically all of it!

I'll offer some of Peter's words as a way of getting to my own thoughts on the subject. Rev. Morales writes: "We are so immersed in a culture that views religion as a matter of what people believe that we think this is the way it has always been. It isn't. All of this emphasis upon what someone believes is actually very modern and very Western. No one objects to calling Buddhism a religion. Yet Buddhism has no theology in the way we use the word (and) doesn't even have a god in the usual sense."

Peter continues: "Jews have never had anything like a creed, a statement of belief. Ironically, Jesus, about whom there are all sorts of creeds, probably never encountered a creed in his life...Jews (do) have a definite sense of God...but the Hebrew scriptures never show an interest in what people believe; (rather they) show an interest in what people do. They are supposed to love God and obey the commandments...The great Hebrew prophets were concerned with justice and compassion...they had no interest in doctrine."

Peter goes on to point out that it was not until the rise of the Church in the Western world that such a heavy emphasis upon belief as the central factor in religion arose, and belief became equated with adherence to a creed or to specifically delineated points of doctrine; and to be a "believer" (so to speak) in good standing then meant taking on that kind of adherence.

This, according to Rev. Morales, is a perversion of what belief actually means. I'll take one more pass at his words before taking leave of them: "The whole idea of belief has gotten twisted. 'Belief' once meant 'what I give my

heart to' or 'what I commit myself to.'... (It) did not mean agreeing to a set of metaphysical or theological propositions." I thank Peter for his insights, and will now move to some of my own.

I said a few minutes ago that I think all human beings are innately religious. I can see where I could get some pushback on that notion, but hang in with me here. Whether we call it "religious" or use some other term, we human beings, each and all, have a religious impulse that both precedes and supersedes any kind of prescribed belief. By "religious impulse" I mean we instinctively, as a component of our essential humanity, reach and search beyond ourselves for some greater unifying meaning for our lives, or some greater unifying purpose to our earthly, time-bound existence.

Let's try a little Latin exercise. I still remember one of the exercises we had to do in a high school Latin class, which was to take a compound English word, break it out into its component parts, figure out the Latin origins of each part, and then put it back together to see what we'd get.

Here's what you get when you do that little beginning Latin exercise with the word "religion:" You get "re" which means "again" as in re-peat or re-turn. And the "ligion" part comes from a verb "ligare" which means to bind together. It's the same term from which we get our word "ligament." A ligament is what holds, or binds, your bones together so they work the way they're supposed to.

Okay, we put the two back together with the word "religion" and we get "to bind together again." Religion, then, in the most basic sense of the word, is the search for that which ultimately binds our lives together, gives them some sense of wholeness, and sustains us again and again over the course of our lives.

My beliefs have changed markedly over the course of my life. But however much my beliefs have changed, they have all served the same impulse, namely my search for what continues to bind my life together. So whether we call in that or not, I think we all have our own version of this religious impulse: An impulse to reach for some binding principle or purpose in our lives.

One of the more poetic expressions of this religious impulse was put forth in a meditation titled *Impassioned Clay* by the late Rev. Ralph Helverson, a

very outstanding UU minister who served the First Parish Church in Cambridge for many years. Rev. Helverson:

“Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.
 Out of the passions of our clay it rises.
 We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived.
 We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present,
 Some self-respect beyond our failures.
 We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty,
 When our nerves are edged by some dream in our heart.
 We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude for all that we have received.
 We have religion when we look upon people with all their failings
 And still find in them good.
 When we look beyond people to the grandeur of nature
 And to the purpose in our own heart.
 We have religion when we have done all we can,
 And then in confidence trust ourselves to the life that is
 Larger than ourselves.”

I think those last two lines in particular nail it pretty well. They are the ones that most closely define for me what I'm calling the religious impulse. It is about looking up from our individual states of existence to a life that, as Helverson puts it, is "larger than ourselves" and in which we feel some trust or confidence. Put another way the religious impulse is a drive, or a need, to feel at home in a universe that still remains greatly mysterious to us, and which fills us with awe and wonder, and on occasion, fear.

I believe our earliest human ancestors began to feel these impulses when they were first able to first look up from the immediacy of their struggles for physical survival and began to wonder if there was anything to their lives beyond those struggles. That is when religion on this planet had its beginnings: When our minds developed or evolved to the point where we could begin to wonder about such things as what's up with this life I'm living and the world and universe in which I'm living it.

Science and religion, as I see it, both emerge from this same impulse--from the need to know how we are related, how we are connected, to all that is beyond us.

Scientific inquiry and religious belief and spiritual searching ultimately all derive from the same human impulse, "from the passions of our clay." From our passion, that is, to both come to terms with our earthliness, and to see beyond it.

The idea, then, that this universal impulse, which is as old as humanity itself, can be channeled into, or reduced to, a prescribed set of beliefs or doctrine is, well, absurd. And the more you think about it, the more absurd it gets. That riff I led off with has its humor largely because it demonstrates this absurdity. This is why belief, of a certain kind, is the enemy of religion. It is the enemy in the sense that stifles, or chokes off, this universal impulse by saying there is only one supposedly "correct" way to respond to such an impulse.

But does this mean that belief itself is a bad thing? Not necessarily. I just said "belief of a certain kind" is the enemy of religion. Recall, in Peter's sermon, he does offer a positive take on this idea of belief. Hear him again; "belief once meant 'what I give my heart to' or 'what I commit to'". Peter says it "once meant;" I say it still does. That is one of the reasons we are here, and why I feel we rightly call ourselves a religious community. This is a setting wherein we discover and live out what it is we give our hearts to; it is where we discover and live out what we most deeply and passionately commit ourselves to; and it is where we seek out what it is that ultimately binds together each of the lives we are living.

This brings me to two points I'd like to leave with you. One having to do with an opportunity I see for our UU congregations—this one certainly included—given the approach to religion and belief as I've been speaking to it here. And the other is on a more personal note as to something I've find that gives me a binding idea or principle for my life.

The first one first: A recent research survey by the Pew Foundation on the religious make-up of America today reveals an increasing number of persons who answer "none" when asked their religious affiliation. That number is now up to 20% of all Americans and 33% percent for those under 30. I'm not in a position to analyze everything that these figures reveal or suggest, but one thing they do seem to indicate is that persons are turning less and less to traditional religions in determining their beliefs or life-stances.

I think there is a real opportunity for our UU congregations here. Being in the closing years (however many years that may prove to be) of my ministerial career, this is something I offer to the generation, or generations, that come after me. I think we need ways of saying to the larger communities in which our congregations are located that we offer a way of being religious in the best and most basic sense of the word. We offer a place where you can grow a soul, where you can in the company of other seekers, search and find what it is that finally and most meaningfully binds your life together and gives you a sense of wholeness.

This has been our message, in fact, for some time. What these figures I just cited suggest to me that there is an increasingly growing population out there that could become increasingly attracted to the message we are giving. I hope as you move forward in your congregational life, especially as you settle your next minister, you will find ways of taking advantage of this development.

To close now on a more personal note, as to what is “re-ligare”—what is binding, that is to say—for me. I turn here to the writings of one of my theological and spiritual mentors, Dr. Sam Keen. I’ll share here a passage from one of the first books he published, back in 1970, titled *To A Dancing God*:

“I remember an old Warner Brothers cartoon. Sylvester the Cat is running away from his ancient enemy the bulldog. Suddenly he sees that the only way of escape open to him is across a pond. Without hesitating he runs out onto the water with no worry about sinking. So long as he remains un-anxious, a lily pad arises to meet each of his advancing feet a split second before he would otherwise sink into the water. Suddenly he becomes alarmed, for although his feet have found support for the journey thus far he can see no visible means of support for the remainder of the trip across the pond. The moment he begins to worry about whether the next lily pad will appear on schedule, he sinks into the water and the bulldog stands on the shore and laughs.”

Taking off on this cartoon image, Sam goes on to say, “The trick is to stop demanding certainty and trust in the ability of the self to respond creatively to whatever happens. You can’t be graceful looking at your feet.” And then he goes on, “I think I would like to define the philosophical position I prefer

as *trustful agnosticism*. I accept my life in wonder as a gift to be enjoyed responsibly, but I remain ignorant about...my ultimate context.”

I like that phrase “trustful agnosticism.” I feel blessed that the lily pads have been there to provide me support “for (my) journey thus far” as the text has it. That doesn’t mean I’ve had everything handed me as I’ve walked across my own pond—rather that I’ve always managed, even in some painful and trying times—to find the support that I’ve needed. The lily pads have indeed kept coming.

Trustful agnosticism means that I don’t know for sure who or what it is that keeps bringing those lily pads along. That’s what Sam means when he says he remains “ignorant about my ultimate context.” What I’ve learned is that coming up with a name for that which sustains me on my life journey—be it “God” or anything else—is far less important than being able to trust in that which ultimately eludes me and that remains an ultimate mystery.

I can only hope to maintain my own trust in the Blessed and Holy Spirit of Life that I believe ultimately sustains me and keeps the lily pads coming. That’s what we’re going to sing about now using some words from Shirley Jackson Denham: *Blessed Spirit of My Life*.

Rev. Stephen Edington
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