

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County

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What is True Religion?
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The title of this presentation was originally "What Good is Religion?" That was a mistake and I changed the title to "What is True Religion?"

While preparing this I couldn't help but think of the incredible damage that organized religion has done in history of the world - particularly the Western World,

In the addition to the carnage of the religious wars and persecutions, I couldn't forget the present day self appointed messiahs like James Dobson, Pat Robertson, James Kennedy, Jerry Falwell and their cohorts. Each is an aspiring power broker who found out that they had the power to make a President of the United States withdraw a candidate for appointment to the US Supreme Court whose decisions they wanted in advance.

While thinking over what I wanted to say, a larger question arose. Are the persons I mentioned really religious leaders or political figures who constructed a perverted kind of Christianity for their own purposes? Ben Laden is only a bit different than they as he adds murder as a weapon.

But you and I are used to denunciations of these power hungry manipulators. I don't think I would get much disagreement if I were to say that these persons and their like hardly represent the teaching of Jesus or of any of the other great religious leaders. However, these observations are quite common and we need to look for True religion rather than the self serving false religion that serves only those who wish to force their curious notions into our national life.

Most of the world's great religious leaders taught about peace, compassion and concern for others. Even Muhammad taught about compassion and Muslim prayers always acknowledge Allah, the merciful and compassionate. Justice was a major concern long before Judaism, Christianity and Islam appeared. The pre Hebrew scriptures speak about protecting widows and orphans. The simplest pronouncement of religion was for Confucius - "Don't do to others what you would have them not do to you." In Christianity, it is said a bit different. "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians and Moslems all owe their first responsibilities to their families but may be encouraged to leave their families to assist, rescue or teach away from homes.

Sometimes, the responsibility to preach and practice compassion and kindness are attributed to God or gods. If we separate the beliefs about supernatural commands and supernatural beings from what humans need to survive and prosper, I think that we might find true religion from some of the points of the several Humanist Manifestos: They tell us that humans have responsibilities to improve the world and make life happy and comfortable.

In a practical sense, we cannot expect most of the world to give up their beliefs in gods, saints, angels and other supernatural beings and places. And it is not necessary for them to do so to practice true religion. Whether or not the commandments to reach out to humans come from god or not, it also seems to be a quality inherited in humans - often denied by inclinations to greed and power but still extant in most humans. With or without God, humans assist each other. The most famous story in Christianity is that of the Good Samaritan who helped the traveler who had been robbed and beaten but left alone by a priest and other Jews. There is no mention that the Samaritan

asked for reward from God. He assisted another human being even though that person was from a rival sect within Judaism.

How do people, whether believers in the supernatural or not, fulfill religious duties? In numerous ways, a few of which I will mention:

Active participation in worthwhile projects -- Persons in formal religions may call this missionary work. When it reaches out to improvement of human conditions it is religiously valid. Worthy missions could include anything from the work of Albert Schweitzer in Gabon, Africa, to the establishment of schools, hospitals dispensaries, preventive medicine programs, women's rights work in American slums or on the streets of Calcutta, rural Africa or Asia. These are all religious missions. People from all walks of life: theists, agnostics, atheists and others undertake such projects to assist other human beings.

Work with national and international peace organizations -- I would call it true religion to be concerned with peace and educational movements .

One of the organizations that might be a model is the World Conference for Peace which had its origins when a World's Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago as part of the Columbia Exposition in 1893. Building on that, American leaders including Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Dr. Dana McLean Greely, first President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Methodist bishop John Wesley Lord and Catholic bishop John Wright were leaders in calling the first conference in the United States in 1964 and another in 1966 in Washington, DC. Later, at the World Conference in Kyoto, Japan in 1970, 1000 religious leaders from every continent met. Included were Baha'i, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, Confucianists, persons from various Hindu groups, indigenous religions, Sunni and Shiite Moslems, Reform Jews, Sikhs, Jains and Zoroastrians as well as members of new religions. This conference ended with a decision that the work would be continued in the form of an inter-religion group called World Conference for Peace.

That organization continues to today and presently has its offices in the Church Center of the United Nations in New York. The composition of the board represents the various groups. It is astonishing to note so many distinguished people on it from an incredible array of religious traditions,.

The board includes Moslems from most continents, general Protestants including the head of the Church of Norway, at least three Roman Catholic cardinals and another bishop, Anglicans, Jews two of whom are Chief Rabbis in their homelands, Lebanese Christians, a Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Buddhists and Zoroastrians. The General Secretary is a Roman Catholic.

Among its accomplishments were working in the peace settlements in Sierra Leone between rebels and the government, It also assisted with settlement of civil strife in Sri Lanka, South Africa and Lebanon.

There are numerous other bodies working on national and international scales. There is even one in Indonesia concerned with mitigating the hostilities between Moslems and Christians where mobs have killed and wounded Christians, mostly ethnic Chinese.

Establishment of Educational and Social Agencies -- At other levels of society, there have been numerous denominations that have contributed to educational and general welfare.

The American college and university system was established by denominations. Although state and other public institutions now have far greater student enrollments, it was the denominations that established the extensive system of colleges and universities we see today.

Initially, several well known universities were established to train ministers; most, but not all, black colleges were established by Northern missionaries who went south after the Civil War to educate recently freed slaves. Although a few colleges were established by the African Methodist Episcopal group, most black colleges were started by white religious groups. Catholic universities and colleges were established not only in the large cities but also on the frontiers to train American Indians. Universalists started institutions that were eventually secularized or taken over by governments. Among those is the University of Akron, and California Polytechnic University (Cal Tech). Two Universalist universities still operate quite successfully - Tufts in Massachusetts and St. Lawrence University in upper state New York.

Our first American college, Harvard was started to train Congregational ministers and for a while was a Unitarian dominated institution. Yale and Princeton were established to provide ministerial training that was more traditional than the liberal studies at Harvard. Baptists (of several denominations), Lutherans, Mennonites, Catholics, Methodists and other denominations also established many colleges - even the Spiritualists established Urbana College. Although many of these colleges remain quite small today, there are still great private universities known more for their academic reputations than for sports. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Fordham, Georgetown, University of Chicago, Emory, Cal Tech are some of those names that one recognized immediately

Denominations are noted for founding hospitals. Of any denomination, Catholics control most in the private area but Jewish, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and Mennonites are prominent. Other groups also founded hospitals.

Small and large religious groups also establish and maintain institutions solely for feed, housing and counseling the poor and homeless. Most cities of any size will have "settlement houses" or food programs. While they may retain some semblance of attempt at conversion, many are engaged in true religious activities like feeding the poor and clothing the homeless. Often, like the Salvation Army, they provide jobs, job training and job counseling.

We have groups here in Florida that feed the poor and homeless and sometimes churches house the indigent on cold evenings.

Many churches and synagogues provide their ministers and rabbis with a ministerial discretionary fund which is used to help those in temporary distress when money can help. Only the clergy person knows to whom the money comes. Usually these funds are in the annual budget or come from a special collection.

Just this week I read about the UU Church in Spokane where a big increase in budget was made so that ten per cent of that budget went to charitable endeavors.

Individual contributions and volunteering -- Many functions in populated areas could not be complete without volunteers. I heard recently that most hospitals would find it very hard to function without volunteers. Volunteers do many clerical and reception jobs, counsel, wheel patient around and drive vehicles from parking lots to hospitals.

Not only in America but in other lands, charity or alms giving is a religious duty. In Islam, one of the commandments is the giving of alms. Each individual is commanded to give 2 ½% of his/her wealth to a worthy recipient. How the 2 ½% is spent is up to the individual and only God need know. It may be given in many ways: to send a child of a relative or friend to school, for example; to fund a mosque, to help with a natural disasters, to give to beggars.

Many Moslems found that it was easiest to give to a charitable organization. This changed after 9/11, as the US government claimed that many of these organization funneled money to terrorists organizations. When these organizations had their funds frozen or were closed, American Moslems, had a difficult time obeying this command of Islam. In the Midwest, they founded new groups and tend to assist college students and local groups where the use of the money is quite transparent. They are quite serious about the giving of alms.

Cultural and Aesthetic Contributions -- All of the major religions have been responsible for architectural innovation and the creation of religious buildings of great significance; the great cathedrals of Europe, the grand Synagogues, the incredibly beautiful mosques and Hindu and Buddhist temples. These buildings are not only architectural gems but are built to inspire and give hope to those who enter them.

Literature that is enduring has also been part of the religious heritage. Whether or not it is true, the Jewish and Christian scriptures are widely read but so are classics like Dante's Inferno and the many writings of English pietists. It would be possible to mention enormous amounts of literature that have affected our culture and that originated in religion. The same is true of the religions of Africa, Asia and Europe.

With a world in a turmoil over Islamic terrorists, American Evangelist political manipulators, religious strife still active in Ireland, inner religious strife in Iraq and Lebanon and Wahabism in Saudi Arabia, it is easy to forget the positive and lasting contributions of true religion to world civilization. In the case of each of the five major religions, the conditions of women were improved over what they were before the introductions of these religions into their societies. In some sectors in Hinduism, women are revered; in Mahayana Buddhism, women are equal to men in worldly pursuits and advancement in life; in Judaism, women were granted autonomy that did not exist in their contemporary society; in Christianity, the status of women improved remarkably over that of the pagan society which surrounded them and in Islam, although no widely known, women have significant rights - even to owning their own fortunes without giving to share them with a spouse.

When we look at the religious landscape today, the most publicity is given to the noisy Evangelists who seem to have captured a large part of the political establishment and influence the federal administration into promotion exceptions to the generally accepted doctrine of separation of church and state. But we do not see much publicity for those who promote the Social Gospel. That is, practice the teaching of a Jesus who said, "Feed the Hungry; clothe the naked."

Even if many traditional religious people show concern and work for social progress, peace and justice believe they do it because it is commanded by their gods, I believe that they would go to rural areas around the world to provide health services because they are humans and feel the need to be of service. I believe that those who sacrifice fortunes to help the less fortunate, believe in humanity; those who volunteer and contribute are also practicing a religion of humanity even if they think it is commanded by a god.

Last November an edition of Time Magazine read like a long sermon on responsibility and how people who strive can make differences in the world. Not only is Bill Gates and his wife mentioned as giving away immense fortunes but a doctor in Africa, trained in America, remains at \$30 a month and serves poor rural people. A woman in Nigeria, raped by an uncle, contracted HIV and now sends her life, although harassed and ostracized at first, in educating her countrymen about the dangers of HIV and AIDS.

Much of that issue of TIME this past week has been about people rich and poor, who make a difference in their communities and nations.

I think that the religion our humanist forbearers taught was concern and care for each other. That is true religion unencumbered by overlays of supreme beings and supernatural places. Nevertheless, true religion can be practiced by those who have contributed throughout the centuries to a betterment of human life, education and strive for peace and justice. All the major religions of the world cry out for these conditions. It is the common cry.

Yes there are those who pervert true religion and try to use religion for political posturing, and wishfully, for power. In time, in countries with the traditions of the Enlightenment, we will see the manipulators for what they are. As one saying has it. They are like monkeys. The higher they climb, the more ugly they get.

Today, we seem to be in a war between true religion and the false religions. The religion of peace, compassion and justice vs religion of political power and coercion of our citizens.

The annals of history can be read to show a continuing struggle between avariciousness and progressivism - compassion. The last three hundred years have given us the advance in human rights and dignity and the last 200 years have given us the advantage of America, leading the way to greater individual freedom and responsibility. Now, much of our national leadership has been blinded to the advances in human progress over these past 200 years and has encouraged foreign adventuring, denigration of the rights and economic needs of its citizens and has found common ground with religious zealots and exploiters of all kinds. That is not the direction in which our country has been headed since its founding. I believe that the general population is beginning to see the reality of American public life and will choose True Religion no matter what their denomination.

Many argue whether religion was invented by humans or a god invented it. When it comes to practice, it makes little difference whether or not one believes in supernatural powers as long as the practices are assisting fellow human beings and showing compassion in every way. Those aspects which attend to these aspects of human life, I call True Religion.

True Religion is that part of dominations that reaches out to people, protects the earth, and struggles for peace and justice. If it carries other baggage, so be it but what is true will survive.