

“What We Can Do for Religion Today”

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**Ho Hum*

In a Barnes & Noble just before Easter, I watched a woman glance at a table of books and make a face like she'd just tasted something awful. Then she hurried on by as if she were afraid the books would bite. Curious, I looked to see what she had grimaced at: All the books on the table were about religion, primarily Christianity. They had titles like “Misquoting Jesus” and “What Jesus Really Meant.”

All I could think was, “Is this what we've done to God? Is that we've done to religion? Is American religion today in such a sad state that when someone sees a table full of religion books in a bookstore, she scurries away and looks like she's going to be sick?”

The answer is yes: This *is* what we've done to religion.

At that same bookstore, about a year ago now, I stood in line with friends waiting to buy the latest “Harry Potter” book at 1 a.m. I was telling my friend that I'd be preaching in a few weeks; she asked me about church and seminary, and I enthusiastically answered. The person behind us said, “Excuse me, I don't mean to eavesdrop, but did you say you're studying to be a minister?”

He had heard my friends and I talking for awhile – we were in line about half an hour – so I imagine he was surprised to hear one of us talking about going into ministry, considering our other, more *colorful* topics.

I said that I was beginning study to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, and he said he'd heard good things about the church and had considered going.

Despite an unfortunate experience with homophobia in a mainstream Christian church, he was still open to the idea of church. He was still seeking, and he'd heard enough about Unitarian Universalism to think maybe it could be a denomination where he'd be welcome, regardless of sexual orientation or gender.

So this, too, is what we've done to God and to religion.

I like to think that one set of America's faithful did the first thing to religion – made it something that many people cringe or wrinkle their noses at – and that another set of the faithful have done the second – created church bodies that are about building community in which people grow, whatever their faith, race, ethnicity, or orientation. Clearly, my bias says that we Unitarian Universalists would fall securely into the second set of folks. But we still have plenty of ground to cover when it comes to helping make religion in America all it can and should be.

**Why Bring That Up?*

It heartens me immensely to know that our faith is known as welcoming and inviting, open to all without discrimination or fear of rejection. It delights me that the guy at the bookstore had heard we'd welcome him. But I see non-Christian Unitarian Universalists acting like we are superior to

Christians, as though we're more mature because we don't believe in Jesus or the Christian God.

Unintentionally, I've found myself becoming a champion of Christianity. There is a discomfort with who we are that leads many of us to wholly discount its value. In many cases, our personal and collective religious histories inspire this discomfort – it has to do with many of us coming out of Christian backgrounds after having had actively unpleasant experiences. Many of us have our own demons to fight, our own brokenness to heal, before we can accept our personal histories with Christianity *or* Unitarian Universalism's roots in it.

Individually, we have to step into the darkness of our religious experiences and dwell there. See what's uncomfortable there, what hurts, what needs healing, and what needs to be let go of. Work on it. By doing so, we're opening ourselves to old and possibly new pains. But we're also healing Unitarian Universalism, one UU, and one congregation, at a time.

Making peace with our religious history is what we can do for religion today.

**For Instance*

And then there's that pesky part of our Principles and Purposes that says our tradition draws from many sources, including "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." We draw from Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to *love*. Until and unless we change that statement of Principles and Purposes, our religious heritage is intact and is explicitly something we look to for guidance and wisdom.

What's difficult, of course, is that loving our neighbors means we have to try to love everyone, not just the neighbors who agree with us. The Dalai Lama suggests how to get past anger after a disagreement: He says to remember that the person you're angry with is human, like yourself, and has similar fears and hopes. By trying to connect to a common humanity, you might be able to let go of some of the anger.

I was excited when I read this: It's such a simple – yet revolutionary – way of thinking. I told my husband I was going to try it with one of my coworkers, a woman whose very presence in the office frequently makes me want to scream, a woman my husband has heard me rant about on far too many occasions. I thought I'd be able to connect with her – or at least not feel raging hostility toward her – if I could find some nugget of shared emotion between us. My husband gently suggested I look for shared humanity in someone I feel less strongly about and work my way up!

Being hopefully realistic in the face of adversity is also what we can do for religion today.

An acquaintance of mine – who is also a UU – said once that a relative of hers who works for the Secret Service is the only person she knows who thinks Dick Cheney is a nice guy. She laughed at how ludicrous the idea was, but hearing how smug she sounded, I had to ask, "Is that Secret Service agent also the only person you know who has actually *met* Dick Cheney?"

This, too, is what my faith does for me and through me: It forces me to point out hypocrisy and to humbly accept when my own is pointed out. I didn't like sticking up for Dick Cheney. But I have difficulty swallowing that it's okay to be prejudiced as long as your prejudice agrees with my own.

Recognizing hypocrisy and working to eliminate it from our own lives and interactions is what we can do for religion today.

In January 2006, I participated in a two-day seminar about nonviolent communication. To illustrate the differences between those who practice nonviolent communication and those who don't, the workshop leader talked about the natures of jackals and giraffes – complete with hand puppets to keep us entertained.

Jackals are aggressors, always suspicious, on the hunt and looking for their next kill. Their view of the world is through slitted red eyes. So jackal communicators are out to hear themselves talk and get their points made; they react first with anger, then – maybe – with thought. More likely, jackal communicators will argue, argue, argue until their opponent gives up, and most anyone they interact with is considered an opponent.

Giraffes, on the other hand, are gentle herbivores. Their long necks allow them to peer at things up close *and* to pull back for a wider view. So giraffe communicators listen, they think quietly about what they're hearing, and they try to see what need of the person they're talking to isn't being met. Giraffes put the other ahead of themselves. They take a few breaths, consider the other, and work to be gentle and thoughtful. Even when facing a jackal communicator, giraffes respond with compassion.

Though it may be difficult to get someone who disagrees with my political or religious beliefs in a room with me, when I do, I can work to be a giraffe communicator rather than a jackal – even when I come up against a jackal instead of the gentle giraffe I'm hoping for.

Reaching across the political and philosophical gulf in religious and public discourse is what we can do for religion today. It is what religion needs us to do.

To be able to live our faith, we have to know and understand our faith. Seems pretty basic, but we're a denomination whose members are diverse in culture, belief, and passion, and lots of us have come to Unitarian Universalism because it *feels* right to us. I know I signed my first church's membership book before I'd really mulled over the principles and purposes. I imagine that's true for others, too. So I encourage each of us to take a Building Your Own Theology or Articulating Your Unitarian Universalist Faith adult RE course.

I encourage each of us to sit down with the principles and purposes and see what we think about them. Do I agree with them? Which do I take to heart more than others? Let's figure out what we believe so that when we are actively shaping our liberal faith in the world, we know what it is we're shaping.

And while we're figuring out what we believe, consider this: We pride ourselves on being a faith that is welcoming to many beliefs and theologies, as we should. But in doing so, we also often emphasize what makes us different from those in the pews beside us, instead of emphasizing what brings us together. As we examine our personal faiths and learn to better articulate them, we can look for commonalities in them – those elements of our individual beliefs that weave us together in the fabric of Unitarian Universalism.

Recognizing and celebrating our common values is what we can do for religion today.

Long before I became a seminarian, I had become the crazy church lady in my circle of friends. I'm the one always talking about some church activity or a sermon my minister gave and the truth I took away from it. It was with great chagrin that my husband, who grew up very purposely unchurched by his ex-Catholic parents, told me *he'd* become the guy in his circle of coworkers who's always talking about church. I say embrace it! Become your group's crazy church lady! Make it well known that the way you live your life is based on Unitarian Universalism.

We're already in our communities, ministering in dozens of ways – volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, working at rape crisis centers, writing letters to the editor. We can say, "I do this because I'm a Unitarian Universalist and I believe that we are all interconnected and that every life has value." Whatever is true for you, however your Unitarian Universalism affects your daily activities and interactions, tell people!

We aren't going to be perfect Unitarian Universalist representatives all the time. Neither are public Christians of any political stripe perfect representatives of Christianity; nor are Muslims, Buddhists, or Jews perfect representatives of their faiths all the time. So let's just rid ourselves of that pressure from the get-go. Live your life tomorrow as you are today, but tomorrow, if you aren't already, make sure you tell others how your faith shapes your life.

Part of the beauty of Unitarian Universalism is that we have so little agenda. We don't have to worship a particular being or even believe such a being exists. We aren't trying to convince others of the validity of our beliefs – but we should be.

Evangelizing about the good news – lowercase – of Unitarian Universalism is what we can do for religion today.

We must declare our liberal religious beliefs as we take political action instead of simply cringing when we hear those on the religious right make sweeping statements about religion in America that don't apply to us. We have to stop being afraid to talk about going to church because of what our non-churchgoing friends and acquaintances might think. I've read in many places the idea that the religious right has hijacked the language of faith in the U.S., and it's long past time that we take it back. Be proud to be a voice of liberal religion; don't let notions about what a religious person in the United States sounds like stop you from putting your voice out there. The voice of the faithful in America sounds like us, too.

Adding our voices to the collective voice of America's faithful is what we can do for religion today.

**So What?*

A friend and fellow seminarian is the director of a large Boys & Girls Club in Wisconsin. She got invited to visit the White House with a Republican member of the club's board. They would discuss with President Bush his faith-based initiative, a program my friend has problems with on one level – that of separation of church and state – and is in favor of on another – as the director of an organization that needs funding to continue helping the kids she loves so much.

More than a little nervous about it, she accepted the invitation and went to the White House. She

met President Bush and discussed her work and how the faith-based initiative funding affects it. But more importantly in *my* book, she sat with the conservative Christian leader of this country and showed him that his is not the only face of religion in the United States. She is a lesbian, a child advocate, a survivor of abuse, a dog lover, a Unitarian Universalist. Her face is *also* the face of religion in this country. Her voice is also the voice of religion in our country, and I can't help but smile at the mental picture I have of her meeting the president: There sat, with George W. Bush, this outspoken, passionate, hysterically funny, lesbian, liberal seminarian.

This is what we are doing for religion today.

Doing some reading to prepare this sermon, I found a Web site for Southern Baptists about how to evangelize to the unchurched and to members of other denominations. I'm pleased to say, we rank! The article was an old one, from 2000, but at least at that point, we were among those the Southern Baptists hoped to bring into their religious fold.

This says to me that we are a threat, that UUs are such a forceful part of the voice of religion that we are starting to be heard.

It was a surprisingly balanced piece. Yes, it says that the only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ and that living our godless lives means we are living in Satan's shadow. *But* the article also acknowledges our dedication to religious diversity and reason, to racial and gender equality, and to stewardship of the Earth.

My favorite part, I think, is when the article says we "are an extremely liberal religion that champions the cause of extreme religious tolerance." Yes! Yes, we are extremely liberal, and we *do* champion extreme religious tolerance! Thank you for seeing that in us. We are doing something right!

In truth, we do lots of things right. And we can challenge ourselves and each other to do more. Learn about – and then make peace with – our denominational religious history and with our personal religious histories. Be realistic but hopeful in the face of adversity. Recognize hypocrisy and work to eliminate it from your lives and interactions. When possible, reach across the political and philosophical gulf in religious and public discourse. Recognize and celebrate what you have in common with the people beside you in the pew. Evangelize about Unitarian Universalism's good news. Add your voice to the collective voice of America's faithful.

Doing all these things for religion on a daily basis isn't humanly possible. But we can recognize the ways our Unitarian Universalism shapes our lives and then make sure others see that, too.

Speaking out, proudly and strongly, for Unitarian Universalism may be *the* most important thing we can do for religion today.

May it be so.

Blessed be.

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