

The End of Religion Is a Beginning text Cincinnati
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INVOCATION

- We give thanks for this day, which we did not create.
- We give thanks for its blessings, beauty and promise, and all the opportunities it contains for love and justice, companionship and service.
- We give thanks for hands that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.
- We give thanks for having been given the gift of love, to give that gift back to the world and build a greater life for all souls.

READINGS:

"Choose Something Like a Star" Robert Frost (1916)

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

East Coker, T.S. Eliot (excerpt)

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth

In my beginning is my end...

That was a way of putting it - not very satisfactory:
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings...

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is new and shocking

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated

Of dead and living...

Old men ought to be explorers
 Here or there does not matter
 We must be still and still moving
 Into another intensity
 For a further union, a deeper communion
 Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
 The wave cry, the wind cry...
 In my end is my beginning.

SERMON

I want to thank Rev. Rachel Lonberg for inviting me into the pulpit and to People's Universalist Church for your gracious hospitality. Moving from the practice of religion as a parish minister, to a professor in the academic study of religion has required a change in viewing human activity and its meaning, as now I would say we are in the middle of sacred time and place as your particular tradition understands it. The lighting and extinguishing of the chalice is an act marking off sacred time and place from ordinary time and place. Light a chalice or candle here at any other time and it will be different for you, or light a chalice or candle at this time in any other place different from this place, and it will be different for you. Lighting this thing signifies sacred time and place, simultaneously reenacted from previous Sundays and constructed differently for this new one. I think doing this is the first act in the generating of an unseen world created as an overlay to the one you have outside this time and place, but that's getting ahead of ourselves. Yet, one way to describe you is as "the people who light a chalice."

And while in the parish ministry I heard discussions, even heated arguments concerning chalice lighting words; if the speaker has to believe them; whether they represent the beliefs of the church in particular and/or Unitarian Universalism in general.

Similarly, it wasn't uncommon then to look for the beliefs that bind UU's together by first noting the word "religion" comes from the Latin, *religare*, "to bind back," and then postulating what the beliefs are that bind UU's together. Why the concern of what binds people together into a church? And, especially, why the priority given to belief?

Because that's not the whole story, not even most of the story. There are more meanings to the word religion than "to bind back." Professor Jonathan Z. Smith identifies the "scholar's study" as the origin of the concept of "religion"; the same word "religion" is used to denote what Unitarian Universalism is as a history and tradition; what we possess as an individual ("She "got religion" and joined a church); and to describe this activity (Oh, that's what they do in their "religion"); the peculiar vitality of a humanly created word and concept used in a whole host of ways! We create words and concepts and bring them *to* what we experience to analyze, evaluate and understand it: ***"That was a way of putting it - not very satisfactory/Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings..."*** As a word and concept, "religion," has a history.

In early Christian times “religion” referred “*primarily to the careful performance of ritual obligations* (Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 269-270).” And when someone “joined religion” it meant going into a monastery and adopting its life discipline. So, originally the concept of “religion” would be analogous to the carefully lighting the chalice or going into the ministry, and not at all with particular beliefs.

Of course, origin isn’t everything. I was born a Hoosier but today am a Michigander, though still it’s true, “*Home is where one start from.*” The meaning of “religion” in Christian Europe concerned ritual activity and entering the priestly life for over a thousand years until the 1500’s and the Reformation, the age of European world exploration, and Wolf Hall. Reformation thinkers evaluated Christian practice against the written word of the Bible and found no justification for many ritualized activities. “*The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies/ For the pattern is new in every moment/And every moment is new and shocking.*” They looked at the monk’s life and saw little of Scripture reflected in it; saw ritual and little of Scripture reflected in it. *Sola scriptura* was proclaimed, the sufficiency of written Scripture - words, and the beliefs contained inside the words - to decide what is appropriate ritual and appropriate ways to live. Homes change.

When our home changes we cannot use all knowledge from our previous home to understand the new one. Before living in Michigan my wife and I lived in Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Illinois, Washington, Tennessee, and Indiana, and, as each new place involved arriving where we were not, to understand it we needed to know where we had been and distinguish it from the new home. Michigan is a lake culture which Oklahoma was not; Oklahoma was a boom and bust culture which Wisconsin was not.

From the Reformation to today the “home” denoted by the concept of “religion” has been built with belief. This has lasted for 500 years. Do you believe in the Bible? Do you walk your talk? Sincerity and truthfulness of belief came to be central to “being religious,” indicated by membership in a church, synagogue or temple. Without those connections you are “secular” or irreligious as in the recent Pew research poll that found America is becoming “less religious.” But, this home is changing again. Remember, we create the concept. The home changing may be particularly difficult for a tradition like this one founded on and deeply invested in the idea that religion denotes belief. Do you believe in God? Do you not believe in God. Hear how central “beliefs” are to identity in this tradition?

There are historical roots to your investiture. Because of your origins in the Enlightenment – Jefferson and Adams and Emerson and Channing - and the 18th and 19th century American experience – your understanding of religion was forged in relationship to the concept of reason, which distinguished it with and against Christianity and Judaism. In the Reformation home of “religion is belief” you’re the people who hold to reason over allegiance to church doctrine or blind faith in determining belief, because, as could be said, “Those who hold to blind faith would be fools not to peek!” Reason in belief because “I believe this” or “I don’t believe that” locates religion in the individual. Churches were built to be that way. Community was understood to be that way.

And in this understanding of rational religion the internal debate here concerned whether human being would someday evolve “out” of the “need” for religious belief to identify what is true. Belief in God walked the line between the irrational supernaturalism Christianity inclined towards, and atheistic humanism which inclined towards an overestimating belief in human power and intelligence. The old theist/humanist debate raged in the 20th century and evolved into the central question of UU identity in the early 21st: What is it that UU’s believe?

For what it’s worth, and it may not be worth anything, in the academic study of religion it is no longer generally held that religion is exclusively, or even primarily about belief. Holding beliefs no longer sufficiently describes human “religious” experience any more than “being religious” means going to church. ***“In succession/Houses rise and fall, crumble/Are removed, destroyed, restored/Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth.”*** Conceiving of “religion” as belief will inevitably pit people of different traditions against one another, whether they’re Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or Unitarian Universalism. Interfaith efforts [hear the assumption that religion involves beliefs pooled into faiths?] rooted in understanding “religion” as primarily or exclusively belief or involving faith, are doomed to failure. ***“The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies.”*** “Interfaith” requires the practice of humility, the intentional act of suppressing the truth of the beliefs one has faith in, a contradiction! Religion as beliefs falsifies.

Religion as beliefs falsifies because people hold their beliefs as if embedded into existence instead of being things we create and bring to our experience. So, the Pew research people say those who do not attend church are secular and irreligious. We mistake our concepts for experience, ALWAYS wider and deeper than what our words and concepts can comprise. Understanding an “other” is possible ONLY by the path whereby we leave the home where “religion is belief” and risk a new view. ***“Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there (at understanding)/You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance/In order to possess what you do not possess (understanding)/You must go by the way of dispossession/In order to arrive at what you are not/You must go through the way in which you are not.”***

Rather than humility as the central virtue in understanding an “other” so different from me, the new place requires that curiosity be the center of this new home. ***O Star (the fairest one in sight)/We grant your loftiness the right/To some obscurity of cloud/Say something to us we can learn/By heart and when alone repeat [like a belief!]/Say something! And it says "I burn."***

Curiosity originates in ignorance. Socrates described wisdom as knowing that I do not know. ***“Old men ought to be explorers/Here or there does not matter/We must be still and still moving/Into another intensity/For a further union, a deeper communion/Through the dark cold and the empty desolation.”*** When a concept like “religion” changes, homes change, boundaries change, and moving from one place to another is the calling, a risky adventure in the land of the obscure at first. Those geographical metaphors sustain “religion’s” new home. It’s the outlining of an area through activity. The activities you initiate by lighting the chalice start to outline the boundaries of an unseen, sacred order overlapping the seen, ordinary one. It doesn’t supplant it, as a candle and a flame right now are still a candle and flame; but also they are more. They are the torch lighting a path through an unseen, sacred territory that is both old and new,

and here and not here, simultaneously. Sacred time and place overlapping but not supplanting ordinary time and place. This unseen order evidences characteristics distinctive to you standing in the tradition that you do; all souls living and dead exist alongside one another, enfolded in a force of love that is comprehensive and thorough in its embrace. And the boundary between the unseen, sacred order and the profane, ordinary one is held as a thin membrane whereby characteristics of one can readily impact the other. The activity of this time and place is sacred to the extent that it reveals what at other times and places remains unseen until you make it seen as an order in which all souls exist.

And so UU's could open their worship with the lighting of a chalice, symbol of the love and unity that begin to generate a sacred, unseen order and extinguish it with the charge to you to extend out what is sacred and unseen into the seen, profane and ordinary life, something done through the ages by the service and sacrifice of individuals and communities: There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit expressed through a love for all souls. AMEN.

BENEDICTION

And now, seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, let us go forth in the world in peace.

Be of good courage,
Search all things
And hold fast to that which is good.
Render unto no one evil for evil.
Strengthen the faint-hearted,
Support the weak,
Help the afflicted,
Love all persons, love all souls,
Serving the Most High,
And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.