

Why Religion?—UUFM August 16, 2020

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WWJD. You've seen these letters on bumper stickers and Facebook memes and on the wayside pulpits of liberal Christian churches. WWJD. What Would Jesus Do? These words are often associated with some very specific behaviors of Jesus, to the exclusion of other acts. WWJD Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers, as opposed to turning water into wine. WWJD Jesus washes the feet of common people and outcasts, as opposed to making admonitions against divorce. WWJD Jesus urges us to love our neighbor as ourselves, as opposed to proclaiming himself the way, the truth, and the life.

WWJD Jesus is a cherry-picked version of the Christian savior. To get to WWJD Jesus, some verses of the Christian Scriptures are emphasized more than other verses. I'm ok with that. I am ok with a cherry-picked Jesus because a cherry-picked Jesus says something important about the cherry-picker's orientation in life. Specifically, it says something important about what particular concerns will guide one's ultimate sense of life—a sense *within* life of what is worth working for, what makes living good, what provides the direction and the desire to work and to live abundantly.

For many Unitarian Universalists, even a cherry-picked Jesus isn't likely to provide a satisfactory foundation for religious practice. I personally moved away from the Christianity in which I was raised. But for those whose lives *are* guided by Jesus, Jesus is not simply a man; he is the central focus of and reason for the religion, an orientation. Now, of course, Jesus in any form is obviously not the only way to define what ultimately guides a person's life. Jesus might make Christianity unique, but all religions provide what African American theologian Charles Long refers to as “orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world.” Long's claim is that a religious attitude provides an ultimate orientation for one's life. What does this mean exactly? And what might it mean for us Unitarian Universalists?

Before we consider ourselves specifically, let us spend some time exploring what we think of when we think of religion. Often when we think of religion, we think in terms of belief. We define religions especially in terms of beliefs concerning judgment of the good and evil one commits in life: an eternity in heaven or hell; reincarnation until you get your duty right; the righteous and faithful observance of the five pillars to achieve paradise; nirvana and release of the ego; remaining in covenant; Valhalla or Summerland; return to Creator. And then there is the object of worship: Jesus, Krishna, Allah, the achievement of full presence, God, Gaia, Creator. Yet, “[. . .] religion is about the more-than-cognitive expression of what ultimately orients human life.” Religion is more than a set of ideas or concepts that we call “beliefs” differentiating one religion from another.

So, of course, when we think of religion, we may typically think also about the settings in which the religious worship, as well as the different names for these locations: church, temple, mosque, ashram, synagogue, stone circle, sweat lodge. We know the different names for the so-called holy people of a religion: minister, priest, imam, lama, guru, rabbi, witch, shaman. In addition, a transcendent ideal guides much religious practice and marks their differences: salvation, karmic release, paradise,

extinction of ego, otherness, unity, oneness. We might think as well about the different rituals involved, the clothing and objects involved in different religions: altars and rugs, robes and stoles, chalices and singing bowls, stones and sage, songs and dances, prayers and rituals, sacred texts and ancestral stories.

We've learned about different religions through experience, through study and reading, and also through observation of people and places we encounter as we live our lives in diverse communities. I am confident you will recognize the following words commonly referred to as "religion," a few of many permutations: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Pagan, Native. We might have encountered these religions first through our own experience and observation rather than through a study of belief systems. And a good many of us found ourselves, as children, in the midst of a religion, maybe more than a little confused about why we burned incense and knelt in my church, why our church was full of statues of saints, why the priests and the nuns were not married to each other, and none of that was observed in my friend's place of worship. But no matter how you became aware of religion and religions, religion is always "more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles and rhythms." In fact, "it's first and fundamental expression is not on the level of thought." According to philosopher of religion Bernard Meland, "We live more deeply than we think." Our bodies, our sensations, our feelings participate in religious observance as much as do our intellects. "Religion [. . .] is neither merely belief, nor merely feeling, nor merely action, nor merely devotion or worship. It is all these things and more insofar as it embodies a person's or a community's sense of the ultimate significance of life."

So, although we might know something about religions or about a religion, even though we are all of us here part of or toying with the religious tradition of Unitarian Universalism, what exactly does it mean to think and act religiously, to embody "a person's or a community's sense of the ultimate significance of life." What is an "ultimate significance of life" that religion can help us to achieve?

Importantly, "significance" and "value" do not mean the same thing. The role of religion as a means to embody life with ultimate significance—this is not at all like assigning value. Determining significance is not at all to say that one thing is valuable because it is useful, because it is costly, because it is socially or culturally called a thing of value. An orientation towards ultimate significance is not in any way concerned with assigning or judging worthiness. No. Rather, to think about ultimate significance is to determine what makes life—that precious, strange, unasked for and undeserved gift—worth the effort of living? Worth the trauma and upset that most of us experience in some measure, because of things done to us or because of things we do to ourselves, or both? And more—how do we live with a sense of ultimate significance—significance above and beyond all other significance—precisely because living is painful, insecure, and uncertain? When normal everyday living is hard and frightening and filled with sorrow and loss?

Certainly, ordinary life is also filled with, well, ordinariness, with routine and perhaps some boredom now and then. Ordinary life is also filled with joy. All this is true, and we live now, in this country, in this world as it is, with a disease that has increased the number of people who usually die in a given year. We live now with fear of infection and frustration at restrictions necessary to preserve our health yet

chafing our need for companionship. We live now with the latent injustices of our society out in full view, the ugly reality forcing us to examine the stories we have been told and have told ourselves about America. We live now with our democracy itself under threat. We live now with scientific truths rejected and facts of history denied. We live now on a planet continuing to heat, continuing to experience extreme weather events marking a massive system change. We live now self-absorbed, with little thought for the wars, the persecutions, the droughts and floods and crop failures ongoing in other parts of this big blue marble. All of this is now part of our ordinary life, which might feel like slow-motion dying. How can we shape a sense of ultimate significance from this, so much of what looks like rubble, looks like destruction?

Our service today offered you three pieces featuring the fragility and vulnerability of the young. You might wonder why, and what these pieces have to do with our religion and how it might orient us toward ultimate significance, a reason to live life abundantly.

Through the first video, we witnessed the visceral connection of that beautiful little boy to the music of Beethoven, inexpertly played by a young student, yet moving all the same. He responded to the music, impacted outside of language and concepts, an inexplicable, somewhat unnerving connection. And his parent, understanding the mysterious power that music has to affect our emotions and our bodies, they let him experience his experience, not correcting, not comforting, but merely companionship in mutuality.

Our offertory today featured my daughter singing. I feel such joy and expansiveness when I hear her sing, but I know her and all that she is and all her trials, tribulations, and triumphs. And I believe that her voice opens a channel of expansiveness in others who do not know her. A channel carved as well by the strangeness of William Blake's art—a drawing holding, with beauty and tenderness, images and words, comfort and threat, life and death—concepts we think of as opposites but which are instead fluid states held in a balance by the medium of print, contrasts rather than contradictions. And the words, words no infant can yet know, the words are those of a parent to a child evoking devotion in the parent and perhaps drawn from the unspoken and vulnerable trust an infant grants to those who hold them tenderly, in mutuality.

And in the second video, wordless unfolds not only the vulnerability of so-called disability but that of unspoken connection, the feeling of being drawn together. That feeling of attraction between potential mates, which is outside of language but very real nonetheless. Each of the young people vulnerable, each having reason to hang back, to avoid connection. Yet each of these lovely youngsters moves toward mutuality.

The young, babies, parents, those of us with disabilities—these are some of the most vulnerable among us. In crafting our service today, I cherry-picked among human beings and focused on the vulnerable—not on the indomitable, not on the accomplished, not on the strong or the learned or the wise. I cherry-picked physicality and emotional experience over words and ideas and concepts. And this is saying something about “orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate

significance of one's place in the world.'" I cherry-picked the vulnerability of the young to make a point about how we all, as Unitarian Universalists, might orient our lives ultimately at a time that feels like an ending, an apocalypse. And *that* way is to focus on beginnings, newness, birth, with all the vulnerability attendant. Philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen suggests we should 'work toward [a focus] on natality and flourishing rather than death.' [Thus our religion serves as a] 'horizon of becoming, a process of divinity ever new, just as natality is the possibility of new beginnings.'" WWUUD? What would Unitarian Universalists do, if this were our orientation?

New beginnings, natality, the newborn, the fragile and the vulnerable—why orient oneself ultimately, why orient a religious community in such a direction? Well, for one thing such an orientation is true about all of our human lives. We are all temporary, we are all vulnerable, and so we should all be treated with tenderness, as precious and mysterious gifts of nature. If we treated ourselves, our relationships, our democracy, our world as if they are all fragile and precious—like children and parents and those with disabilities—perhaps we would take better care of them. If we treated justice and freedom as fragile and precious, perhaps we would foster them and support them with more dedication and persistence. Perhaps if we understood, really and truly felt in our bones, that everything is always beginning, always natal and emergent, we might live with more creativity, individually and as communities. We might live as if life were always new and potential, so that when the hard rocks of challenge and pain crack open, we would find fullness and goodness, sweet honey, flowing from them.

"Under the weight of destruction, we will all need the strong shelter of forgiveness and deeper wells that give the sweet water of welcome." "In order to survive the apocalypse, we have to give up the counterfeit currency of self-sufficiency, the mistaken addiction to competition." We need to sing into and sing through our hearts as well as our minds, to foster wings of creativity and roots of community. May we be willing to orient our lives toward vulnerable connections and the promise of the ever-new beginnings, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together "Amen."

Additional References:

- Esposito, John L., Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis. *World Religions Today*. 4th Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
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