

Sermon presented to the
Unitarian Society of Menomonie (WI)

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by

Bob Bledsoe

HOW MUCH RELIGION DO WE NEED?

I'd like to start out this morning pointing out that I hope to give a longer-than-usual amount of time to congregational dialogue. I'm going to present a lot of quotes and a few observations, but I think this is a subject better suited to dialogue than to monologue.

As with so many of my sermon topics, this one starts with a question I asked myself. The idea came, as many do, while I was listening to another of those Christian

radio stations of which I am very fond, and the preacher (I think it was Chuck Swindoll) said of someone, “this boy needed a lot of religion.”

“A lot of religion?” What’s “a lot” of religion? Is there an amount that each person can dip into, like water? (And here I’m getting into the experience of Jesus as the Living Water in the Gospels, that’s just too much to throw at this simple question.) Is there a minimum amount of religion? Is there such a thing as too much religion? And who gets to decide?

The answer for each individual ultimately must, of course, be made by each individual. One person might need very little religion, perhaps characterized by the word “faith,” in order to operate daily; while another person, also using the word “faith,” may need great gobs of it, with injections at regular times, like insulin. I can’t answer that question for any individual, perhaps not even ultimately for myself, and I’m not certain when it really comes down to it if it is a question one can answer. It’s like asking, “How much food does one need?” Enough to stay alive.

No, my question is for a larger “we,” the “we” of community, of Unitarian Universalism, of this congregation, maybe even for the world at large. How much religion do we need?

First of all, let’s start with a definition of terms. Wikipedia, which is fast becoming my favorite reference source, defines **spirituality** as “in a narrow sense, a concern with matters of the spirit, however that may be defined; but...also a wide term with many available readings [that] may include belief in supernatural powers... but the emphasis is on personal experience. It may be an expression for life perceived as higher, more complex or more integrated with one's worldview, as contrasted with the merely

sensual,” while **religion** is defined as “sometimes used interchangeably with faith or belief system—is [the] belief concerning the supernatural, sacred, or divine; and the moral codes, practices, values, institutions and rituals associated with such belief. In its broadest sense some have defined it as the sum total of answers given to explain humankind's relationship with the universe...Occasionally, the word ‘religion’ is used to designate what should be more properly described as ‘organized religion’—that is, an organization of people supporting the exercise of some religion, often taking the form of a legal entity.”

In her essay, “Religion as Relationship,” Reverend Patricia Hoertdoerfer approvingly quotes A.N. Whitehead’s description of religions as those credos that “evolve out of the particular instances of our experiences which we generalize toward final truths that ‘are amplified into a coherent system and applied to the interpretation of life.’”

Matthew Fox, a former Roman Catholic priest who, evicted from his order by then-Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has since become an Episcopal priest, tells the story of a gentle old woman found by a minister reading in the darkened church. “Sister,” the clergyman tells her, “this is hardly the place to read a newspaper.” The old woman answers, “But I’m suffering with the people I’m reading about.”

As with all explication of a text, there’s some debate about what the clergyman is objecting to, whether it’s that she chooses to read in church or that she’s reading in the dark, but that’s really neither here nor there for my purposes. What is important is that we recognize that religion, as the old woman demonstrates, is not merely communion but suffering.in communion. We react to the Holy or the Divine or the Universal in our spirituality, but we react to each other in our religion.

Huston Smith in his book *Why Religion Matters* enumerates four parts of what he calls “religious sensibility.” They are

“1. The religious sense recognizes instinctively that the ultimate questions human beings ask—What is the meaning of existence? Why are there pain and death? Why, in the end, is life worth living? What does reality consist of and what is its object?—are the defining essence of our humanity. They are not just speculative imponderables that certain people...get around to asking after they have attended to the serious business of working out strategies for survival. They are the determining substance of what makes human beings human.” We insist on asking these questions, and I think Smith is correct in saying they aren’t just questions that we can reflect on at ease when we aren’t busy slaughtering game or collecting a paycheck. I know that I think such things every day, as I’m working, as I’m driving, as I’m cooking or eating what I’ve cooked, and sometimes, if I’m very lucky, I get a response from somewhere deep down in what I’d call my soul but could as easily be called something like a base or a tickle in the belly, that seems very much like, “This is not it,” or “This is it.”

“2. [The] religious sense is visited by a desperate, at times frightening, realization of the distance between these questions and their answers.” It’s impossible to answer every single question we have about existence, and maybe even impossible to answer even one. Naturally, that doesn’t stop us Curious Georges from asking: we go on asking, even if we ignore the fact we still haven’t gotten round to answering the last set of questions. I suppose I’d call this “faith.”

“3. The conviction that the questions have answers never wavers, however, and this keeps us from giving up on them. Though final answers are unattainable, we can

advance toward them as we advance toward horizons that recede with our every step. In our faltering steps toward the horizons we need all the help we can get..." Maybe this is really what "hope" is, the conviction that there are answers available and we just need to find the right guide or the right teacher to help us locate them. Smith notes that theologian Karl Barth said "he faced each day with the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other." For many of us, it might be just the newspaper and the conviction that people are altogether bad or altogether good, but we got that idea from somewhere.

"4. Finally, we conduct our search together—collectively, in congregations...Emile Durckheim, the nineteenth-century sociologist, thought religion was entirely a social affair, a reification of the shared values of the tribe. Today our individualistic society comes close to assuming...that religion is altogether an individual affair...As usual the Buddha walked the middle path. 'Be ye lamps unto yourselves,' for sure; but do not forget that the *sangha* (the monastic community, and by extension the company of the holy) is one of the Three Jewels..." Spirituality, it strikes me, is responsible for asking these questions. Religion asks the questions in community.

"All religion," Hoertdoerfer writes, "begins in experience; it is discovered." Reverend Scotty McLennan, the former roommate and Unitarian Universalist minister who served as the model for Gary Trudeau's character Reverend Scott Sloan in *Doonesbury*, writes, "To find one's religion, it's not enough just to open one's mind and think deeply. Each of us must also open all our senses and experience the world. Religion grows from the heart as much as from the head, and it cries out to fuse body and mind. Faith...is an orientation of the whole personality, a total response. It's not just

belief...it is the ability to experience the universe as meaningful. Having faith means that our lives hold together and make sense at a deep level, rather than seeming ultimately awry, askew, or absurd. Therefore, your religion is something you not only think about but also dance, sing, eat, paint, and sculpt...You should feel it as well as explain it, hear it as well as see it, taste it as well as smell it.”

I love this idea that we dance and sing our faith. And as usual, it reminds me of a story. On New Year's Eve, 1989, I was at a dance commune outside Amherst, Massachusetts, with a number of people who were very dear to me then. It was a large house on about fifteen acres off a dirt road. There was a lot of snow on the ground, and when I looked out the windows I could see the former barn which had been made into a ritual dance space and the milk house that had been sealed to make a sauna and a number of yurts that the residents had set up on the grounds as their private living spaces.

We had danced for days and days, joyously flinging ourselves into space and sometimes being caught by someone and more often not, and it's a lesson in the differences age makes that in those days I was in enough condition not to feel too bad physically if no one caught me after I flung myself into the void. But we'd danced and sweated and sang and had snowball fights and long walks in the winter woods, and here it was New Year's Eve, and the end of one decade and the beginning of another, and it was time for ritual. No one claimed any religious affiliation, other than a few self-professed Pagans and one woman who said she was Wiccan, but we ended up with a very touching ceremony out on the lawn. With a single candle stuck in the snow at midnight, as a group the communards and the visitors circled around and around, chanting and singing and sometimes just speaking. Our song went like this:

“When you dance you’ve got to dance with the strength of a lullaby—

You never know until you try.

And when you dance you’ve got to dance with the warmth of a lullaby—

You never know until you try.

And when you dance you’ve got to dance with the patience of a lullaby—

You never know until you try.

Don’t let nothing stop you, don’t let nothing block you

Once you know your dance is true.”

We sang that many times, alternating “dance” with “dream,” “love,” “trust,” “work,” and a number of other verbs. There was no musical accompaniment, just as there was none this morning; we sang acapella and the sound of our voices reverberated across the lawn and among the trees and reflected off the yurts and the barn and the big main house. There was no light except from the single candle: it was a fully dark night with no moonlight, and when we finished we danced and rolled in the snow taking joy in the mere fact other bodies and other voices existed. It was a wonderful ritual that fulfilled something in me I wasn’t aware I’d needed filled. On reflection now, nearly twenty years later, I think this is what religion is all about. It is the dancing, in cadence or to your own tune, the singing together, harmonious voices and ones like mine, the shared dreams and love and joys and concerns. I invite you now to share yours with us.