

“THOUGHTS OF THE FUTURE”

by
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Opening Words: “Thoughts of the Future”

Most religions are based on Holy Books written long ago, or on the teachings of prophets, long since dead. Some of these beliefs are worthy of study, but others are simply not true. What we need, what the world needs, is a religion that helps us deal with the problems of today, and with those of the foreseeable future: Unitarian-Universalism is such a religion. Today’s service is built upon this theme. New Year’s Day is a good time to rethink our beliefs, to reformulate our goals and ideals.

Lighting the Chalice: “Unitarianism-Universalism”

Our religion is well suited to the needs and conditions of the modern world and has been given a new and broader meaning to the old theological labels “Unitarian” and “Universalist.” They have grown beyond their meaning of the Victorian Era.

“Unitarian” now stands not only for the oneness of God, but for a unified view of life in which sacred, secular, and scientific ideals merge into a self-consistent philosophy. It celebrates the unitary character of the human family, rejoicing that no matter what our race or faith or gender, we belong to the unified family of humanity.

“Universalism” has grown beyond the ideal of universal salvation to embrace the concept of universal truth. Truth is not sectarian, different for Christian, Buddhist, or Jew. Truth is universal. It is progressively discovered and formulated by individuals of all faiths, and when substantiated, it is the same for all individuals everywhere.

Thus our Unitarian and Universalist theologies have grown and been transformed in time to a world faith--a faith that brings together all types of truth--religious truth, historical truth, scientific truth, and even good old common sense.

That’s what our religion is all about and that’s why we like it. I will expand upon these ideas in today’s service.

Reading: “Spiritual Imperatives” (Based on “Spiritual Imperatives” by Krista Taves)

I believe that Unitarian-Universalist religion provides a truer and better way of approaching life in the modern world than other religions. This is not something you usually hear in our churches, that we are a better way. We are not ones to openly say that what we have is better than another religion. Historically, we are quiet about who we are, careful not to become like those self-righteous religions many of us left. In fact, we are so intent on being different that sometimes it’s even hard for us to say that we are a religion, much less that we believe the religion we offer is better. And yet, in our quietness, we have marginalized ourselves, failing to spread our liberating message of freedom and equality to a world that desperately needs it.

It is time for us to be clear about what we stand for, because if we don’t others will. If we continue to be quiet, we will be branded the religion that stands for nothing, where you can believe anything you want. If that is true, liberal religion becomes synonymous with permissiveness, immorality, and laxness. Locally, we hear this on talk radio every day. Tune in to WRSC on AM or the Christian Radio stations on FM. Listen to what they say about liberals.

We do stand for something. We stand for freedom, equality, and compassion. We stand for a world that contains many truths--of many types: science, religion, common sense. But here is something we often fail to mention. The truths we believe in can be tested, and have been tested.

Ours is not a religion where you can believe anything you want, ours is a responsible search for truth and we are accountable for the consequences of our beliefs. So although we promote freedom, it is not freedom at all costs. Unitarian-Universalism is not a religion for lone rangers. It is a religion for lovers of freedom who belong to a community, a community in which we are held accountable for our beliefs and our behaviors.

We believe that all religions have a right to exist. We have a history of practicing tolerance, but some think tolerance means affirming all beliefs as equally true. Well, all religions are not equally true. If we examine them closely, all religions are not equally true, but we are sometimes afraid to say that. In our fear of judgment, in our reluctance to hurt the feelings of others, we refrain from judging beliefs that are damaging to society. These beliefs have the right to exist, but we have the right to criticize them.

Let me be clear about this. There is a difference between judging a person and judging a belief. We are not judging people. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. However, we do have the right to judge beliefs.

When religions advocate hurting people, when religions advocate discrimination, when religions advocate violence, it is appropriate to judge.

Unitarian-Universalists have something to say about these issues and something to do. The time for silence is over.

Morning Message: “Consilience, the Unity of Knowledge”

I’ve been reading a book entitled “Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge” by Edward O. Wilson. Using the natural sciences (chemistry, physics, and biology) as a model, the author extends the same line of thinking to other forms of human knowledge, including philosophy, ethics, and religion.

There is a parallel here to the definitions of Unitarianism and Universalism I gave earlier. Many U-Us believe that the various forms of truth--religious truth, scientific truth, common sense--are unified in a similar way. So what do we believe about religion?

Let me begin by acknowledging that religion has an overwhelming attraction for the human mind, and that traditional religious convictions are largely good. Religion arises from the innermost feelings of the human spirit. It nourishes love--love for family and friends--love for strangers and for people in need of help. This is good. Traditional religions also encourage devotion--devotion to good causes--devotion to kindness--devotion to truthfulness, and other forms of good behavior. This is also very good. Many major religions also nourish the spirit of hope--hope for a better future--hope for a better world--hope for happiness for everyone, sometime, somewhere. The spirit of hope is important for all of us, but especially for those who have had unhappy lives. Hope brings with it a spirit of happy optimism--a “can-do” spirit that makes progress for good possible. Love, devotion, and hope--three wonderful features of traditional religion. I want these to be part of my religion too--part of Unitarian-Universalism.

But some religious beliefs have a destructive side that incorporates some of the worst excesses of materialism. An estimated one hundred thousand belief systems have existed in history, and many have fostered ethnic and tribal wars. Each of the three great Western religions--Christianity, Islam, and Judaism--has expanded at one time or another using military aggression. Islam, which means “submission,” was imposed by force of arms on large portions of the Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Asia. Christianity has come to dominate North and South America, as much by colonial expansion as by spiritual grace. And Christian rulers had an instructive example to follow in the early history of Judaism. In the Old Testament of the Bible, the Israelites were ordered by God to wipe the promised land clean of heathen. In the Book of Deuteronomy (20: 16-17), God says: “You shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittites, Amorites, and the Canaanites, as the Lord your God has commanded you.” Over a hundred cities were consumed by fire and death.

I bring up these historical facts not to cast aspersions on present day religions, but simply to remind us that there has been a Darwinian struggle among religions that is analogous to the “survival of the fittest doctrine” among biological species. The swiftest road to success has always been sponsorship by a conquering state. This thought resonates with the geopolitical struggles of today.

Alliances between priests and tribal chieftains go way back in history, but that is not the only problem with traditional religions. One of the most dangerous of religious devotions--in my opinion--is the belief: “I was not born to be of this world.” I repeat: “I was not born to be of this world.” Many “true believers” are convinced that heaven and the afterlife are far more

important than what happens in this world today. Thousands of Moslem suicide bombers talk of the paradise awaiting them in heaven, and thousands of Christians await the arrival of Jesus and the second coming that will make heaven here on earth and eradicate infidels--sending them off to Hell. I don't want any of that craziness in my religion, nor do I want many of the restrictions on diet and life-style described, for example, in the book of Leviticus.

But having accepted love, devotion, and hope as the framework of religious thought--how do we tie these beliefs together with scientific beliefs and with common sense? And how do we apply these beliefs to the problems and opportunities of the 21st century?

Unitarian-Universalists believe in using the "heart" and the "head" together in developing a personal religious philosophy. We need to go back and forth across this boundary.

For knowledge of the future we need accurate projections of the trends shaping our planet. We need to be informed about vital statistics that enable us to focus our efforts as religious liberals. I draw my information from the World Watch Institute. It provides an independent vision for a sustainable world, focusing on a fact-based analysis of trends in population, water, hunger, education, and other important variables. Of the key indicators, population and military expenditures are two that our religious communities have failed to act upon. The Biblical injunction: "Go forth and multiply" no longer applies to a crowded planet with a population that increases by 73 million each year. Moslems, Christians, and Hindus are major contributors to the population problem, with 25% of young people unemployed in the Near East, and 17% in Latin America. Overpopulation is the underlying threat to world stability and is one of the causes for the huge military build-up throughout the world. The U.S. military budget is 50% of the world budget. At \$385 billion in 2004, it is 100 times bigger than our peacekeeping expenditures of \$3.8 billion. When our present administration took office five years ago, one of the first big cuts was in international family planning, carried out at the urging of several Christian churches. We need to speak out on these issues that are degrading the quality of life, the environment, and causing wars.

What is the link between ethics, religion, and science? We may ask where our ethical principles come from if not from divine revelation. There is an alternative hypothesis that moral precepts and religious faith are products of the human mind, which in turn evolved from biochemical principles. I believe we learned how to behave by trial and error. Cooperation works. I see it in my marriage, my extended family, and I see it in this fellowship. Thousands and thousands and thousands of generations could teach people (and animals) how to take care of each other with love, with devotion, and with hope for the future. That, I believe is the origin of religion. It is no less holy than religions preached in neighboring churches. That's my kind of U-Uism.

But where does that leave God? God is my name for my inner spirit; God is my name for love of Pat and for all of you. This is my inner God. Each of us has an inner God that is working to make us better people.

I also have an outer God that incorporates all that is not understood about our universe: The black holes, dark matter, subatomic particles, and string theory. So there is a God in all that we don't understand. This is how I deal with those eternal questions: What is the underlying nature of the universe? How did it all get started? Why are we here? Where is it all headed?

In summary, it seems to me that there are two ways of looking at the infusion of ethics and a moral code into our Unitarian-Universalist religion: a top-down approach or a bottom-up approach. A top-down almost infinite universe God--a dark matter origin of morality--if you like--an all-encompassing view of God that acts throughout the universe. How or why such a God of Nature would incorporate an ethical code into living systems is a mystery to me.

The bottom-up approach seems much more likely to me. In my work as a materials scientist, I think of electrons, atoms, and molecules acting in concert to build engineering systems that mimic living systems with sensors, actuators, and complex feedback systems. It seem possible--perhaps even likely--that ethical behavior patterns would evolve over many generations----

But, what is important about religion regardless of how it came about--is that love extends to all--and that each of us practices devotion--devotion to helping others and making a better world--and finally that we maintain and promote hope--a vision that we can succeed in making a peaceful world with happiness for all. Love, devotion, and hope are essential for a future-oriented religion.

Closing Words: "I See a World" (From John Carlos Sullivan)

I see a world where science and technology will serve the purpose of enhancing life, widening vistas of human happiness and experience and not the aggrandizement of a few or the production of instruments to maim and kill.

I see a world where every child will, by the fact of birth, inherit equally with every other human being the wealth, privileges, prerogatives, obligations, and responsibilities of life.

I see a world where old concepts of religion and race divide and antagonize will disappear, to be replaced by the eternal truths of love, devotion, and hope.

I see a world where the search for truth is the only religion, with the knowledge that the search is never-ending and the realization that religious truth and nature's laws are one and the same.
