

Four Faiths: Functional Theology for Secular Society

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Reading: from *Religious Integrity for Everyone* by Rev. Fred Campbell

What is integrity? My *American Heritage Dictionary* defines integrity as “a state of being unimpaired, whole, complete.” I use “integrity” . . . to refer to the relationship between human experience and the words used to describe that experience. A person has integrity when his or her words communicate congruence with personal experience and the experiences of other people. People have integrity when they say what they mean and do what they say. Their words describe reality as others remember it and experience it. This is what it means to tell the truth. I hear the truth when someone else puts into words what I have experienced, or may experience, in the world in which we both live. . .

Religions intend to bring spiritual health to human lives. Yet, in today’s world, many people find religious language and participation irrelevant. This discrepancy between religious intent and what is happening in the actual world highlights the problem of religious integrity.

A religion has integrity when it enables human beings to enact the drama of living, aging, and dying with understanding and acceptance, meaning and purpose, trust and love, faith and hope. A religion has integrity when its articulated understandings about our world and our living “make sense.” A religion suffers a crisis of integrity only when its spoken truths and practices no longer meet the needs of the people it seeks to serve.

Sermon

It’s been a while since we’ve done much explicitly theological exploration in our Sunday services. And so I’ve decided to present a miniseries of five services over the next couple of months devoted to theology. These will be based, in large part, on the work of Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Fred Campbell. His work includes the book, *Religious Integrity for Everyone: Functional Theology for Secular Society* and an Adult Religious Education Course called “Four Faiths,” designed to explore his functional concepts of theology.

Campbell places a great emphasis on religious integrity – on the importance of religion “making sense” – and so an immediate challenge may arise for those who find it difficult to use God-language with integrity. After all, the typical dictionary definition of “theology” is something like “the study of the nature of God.” So, if God is not a part of your experience or conceptualization of reality, how can theology be relevant.

Campbell’s way of addressing this challenge is to broaden or expand the meaning of religious language as expressed in terms such as “theology.” In doing so, he develops what he calls “functional religious language.” That is, religious language understood in such a way as to make it actually useful. As for the concept of “theology,” Campbell’s functional definition is “Human reflection using memory and imagination about how individuals and communities of individuals relate to the transcending and transcendent reference systems of meaning within which living takes place.” He would assert that we all operate within some transcendent reference system. But that system may or may not have “God” at its center. And so we can all do theology.

For those of you who have participated in the Adult Religious Education Curriculum, “Building Your Own Theology” (BYOT), this general approach may sound familiar. Indeed, BYOT takes the approach of assuming that everyone, regardless of their particular theological orientation, has convictions and beliefs relative to the big religious questions. The aim of the course is to help participants articulate those convictions, and thereby define their theology.

I’ll say more about the difference between BYOT and “The Four Faiths” later. But I’ll point out that one of the primary commonalities has to do with that idea of religious integrity. Of the importance of religion making sense and actually connecting with real life. If you’ve been around here for a while, I hope you have found that to be a routine feature of our religious practice and exploration as religious liberals – as Unitarian Universalists.

But such is not always the case in religious communities. And when it’s not, the result can be a crisis of religious integrity. Fred Campbell writes that “People experience a crisis of religious integrity when any or all of the following things happen:

- Their religion cannot answer a question of meaning for which they must have an answer.
- Explanations given by their religious faith for an experience, such as the death of a child, are unacceptable and unworkable, so that working through grief is difficult, if not impossible.
- They realize that life’s meaning escapes them.
- Their religion does not work or make sense as they confront the reality of the world in which they live.
- Engaging in religious ritual one day a week does not connect or influence living during the other six days.
- The apparent wide distance between religion and science leaves them pondering.
- When a Christian [or a Muslim or a Jew] implies that only Christians [or Muslims or Jews] can be good people, they feel uncomfortable.

One typical way that people encounter the challenge of religious integrity is when they’re sitting in a worship service and find that they cannot, in good conscience, say some of the words of a creed, or sing some of the words of a hymn. Here again is that problem of language.

The way that Campbell understands the problem of language is that religious terms are typically defined formally in terms of the perspective of a particular religion. In the case of the English language, that generally means Christianity. But that needn’t be the case, which leads to Campbell’s attempts to develop a broader, more inclusive, set of functional definitions so that Christianity is not the only context in which the language makes sense. In fact, Christianity and “each of the world’s religions becomes an example of these definitions and not the only possible religious option open to human beings.”

An important starting point in this project is the definition of “religion” itself, which, for inclusiveness’ sake, must be freed from a necessary tie to concepts of a deity or the supernatural. While Campbell’s definition of religion does not require God or the supernatural, it does invoke transcendence, which simply means “larger than.” Simply stated, “Religion is how human beings live within that which transcends them.” If we

can't affirm something in reality larger than ourselves, I guess that just means that our religion is completely self-centered, and we become our own God. I hope we don't go there.

Given that understanding of religion as the means of understanding and relating to the transcendent, Campbell has, based on years of experience in ministry, identified four viable faith paths, each defined by how language is used, and from what transcendent reference its meaning and values are drawn. It's important to note that these faith paths are independent of any particular religion. They form a more general categorization reflecting different personality types and different religious sensibilities. As such, each of these four faiths may exist within the context of any of the formally-established religions, or outside of all of them.

Before I go on to name and describe the Four Faiths, I'd like to say a bit about the enterprise of breaking reality down into lists and categories. I see this as a sort of two-edged sword. On the one hand, useful, but on the other hand, susceptible to abuse. On the useful side is the increased understanding that can come from recognizing distinctions between one approach and another. How are we alike and how are we different? I think our human curiosity about such questions leads us naturally to systematize our observations and our experience.

The down side is the temptation to conclude that, once we know which "box" someone or something falls in, we know everything we need to know. We then forego the harder work of ferreting out the nuances – the subtleties – that are necessary for a fuller understanding. Therefore, I would caution us to use such systems of explanation as general frameworks of understanding, and not as rigid boxes that cut off any further investigation.

Furthermore, just as no one religion holds a monopoly on Truth, so no particular way of systematically describing the varieties of faith paths can lay claim to telling the whole story. Let me illustrate that by mentioning another, similar attempt at explaining a variety of religious paths. It's found in the work of the Rev. Peter Richardson – in particular, in his book, *Four Spiritualities: Expressions of Self, Expressions of Spirit: A Psychology of Contemporary Spiritual Choice*.

Richardson's work is based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is in turn based on a Jungian understanding of human psychology. The MBTI describes personality types based on four preference pairs: Extraversion/Introversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling, and Judging/Perceiving. I'll not go into any detail about these categories; that's for another day, another time. Suffice it to say, this is one more way to assign people to categories based on their similarities and differences.

Those who work with the MBTI must be careful not only to avoid the trap of putting too much meaning on which of sixteen psychological boxes someone falls into. They must also resist placing any value judgment on the various pairs. That is, introverts are not necessarily better than extraverts; they're just different.

While there are sixteen different types defined by the MBTI, Richardson only defines four different spiritual paths. That's because he focuses on only the Sensing/Intuition and Thinking/Feeling dimensions. His investigation into the relationship between personality type and spiritual practice leads to four basic types of spiritual journey, which he calls: the journey of unity, the journey of devotion, the journey of works, and the journey of harmony.

Richardson's work "provides a sorting tool . . . for understanding the many spiritual options before us" and "shows that the way we perceive and respond to the world is directly connected to the spiritual path we find most personally satisfying."

If this piques your curiosity, and you'd like to know more about the various personality types and spiritual paths, or perhaps figure out which one best describes you, talk to me later and I'll point you in the right direction to learn more. The main point here is that there are not only several different religious or spiritual paths; there are also several different ways of thinking about and describing that variety.

Depending on the level of interest I detect, I may explore Richardson's "Four Spiritualities" in more depth some time in the future – perhaps next year. Meanwhile, let me return to this year's theological project, Fred Campbell's Four Faiths. The four faiths that Campbell names and describes are: Humanism, Naturalism, Mysticism, and Theism. Over the coming months, I'll be devoting one entire service to each of these faiths. But let me say just a little bit about each one now to give you at least a small glimpse of what is to come.

I talked a bit earlier about transcendence and transcendent reference systems of meaning. One of the primary distinctions between and among the four faiths is that each uses a different transcendent reference system of meaning. And remember: one is not necessarily better than another. They're simply different. One may fit you better than another. But a different one may fit the person sitting next to you. And that's okay, especially if we can share some common language to understand where each other is coming from.

The first of Campbell's four faiths is Humanism. As he understands it, "Humanists draw the meaning of living from within our human community. They believe that all knowledge and values come from this source." Humanists tend to seek control of things and events, because they believe that if we want to see a better world, it's up to us to make it that way.

The second faith is naturalism. "Naturalists have a profound sense that humans are dependent upon and involved with the natural world of all living and non-living entities." The focus on dependence and interdependence leads to less emphasis on control, and more on seeking knowledge and acceptance within the transcendent reality of nature.

The third faith is Mysticism. "Mystics are people who have experienced a 'union with the transcendent creativity of our Universe.' There is an appreciation of science, and yet a sense that there is more to our world than science is currently able to handle. Mystics tend to live in two realms – the material and the spiritual, where "the world of spirit is one of energy, process, and relationships."

And finally, the fourth faith is Theism. "Theists know God as a real presence in their living. . . God is the ultimate transcendent reference system upon which life depends for order and purpose. . . All values come from God."

Let me remind you that religious integrity is of crucial importance to Campbell. That means that his idea of functional religion carries with it the need to fulfill religious needs as experienced in the context of real life. As such, "there are [several] expectations, which all religions must strive to meet. They are realistic, . . . , rational, and reverent." What does that mean?

Briefly, a realistic religion must be adequate and applicable . . . relevant to the time, space, ethnic traditions, culture, and living of individuals, as well as communities; one that is rational must be consistent and coherent; and, if reverent, a religion must constantly work at bringing transcendent perspective and proportion to human living.

As this series unfolds in the coming weeks, I'll expand on how these expectations get played out in the practice of each of the four faiths.

The other criterion that Campbell suggests for evaluating and comparing the four faiths has to do with how they address some of the perennial fundamental religious questions. He mentions seven areas of religious concern that any self-respecting religion must address in one way or another. Once again, the terms for these areas come from traditional theology, but are redefined based on human experience. The seven are:

1. Soteriology: the study of salvation; how humans respond to death
2. Ontology: the study of being, doing, and power
3. Eschatology: the study of last things, time, and change
4. Metaphysics: the study of what is real
5. Ethics: the study of values, morality, good and evil, right and wrong
6. Christology: the study of how religions use symbols
7. Epistemology: the study of how we gain religious knowledge

Those who have participated in Building Your Own Theology will recognize a good deal of overlap here. The present exploration is simply organized a bit differently. And, once again, we will expand on these theological concepts as we make our way through the four faiths.

I look forward to this opportunity for each of us to reflect on our own religious identity, to understand better where we fit in the larger religious landscape, and also to enhance our understanding and acceptance of how others, starting from different premises, may take different, but equally valid, faith paths. Please note that I am *not* suggesting that *all* faith paths are equally valid. I'm only defending those that meet the criteria of realism, rationality and reverence. It is our responsibility to apply those tests to paths that we explore along our religious journey.

I leave you with the following words, with which Campbell concludes his book:

Let us appreciate the paradox that any one person may be very intelligent and still not have the capacity to know what some other person knows from direct experience. Let each of us be given the time, space, and support needed for us to achieve vitality and vibrance in our living as we do what we need to do with our solitariness. May the blessing of realism, reason, and reverence enable us to create and sustain a world in which every individual finds spiritual health in a religion that is grounded in his or her own culture.

So may it be.