

11/15/09 Sermon

“Spiritual But Not Religious”
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In a way, this sermon is about the chicken and the egg; which came first, spirituality or religion?

I am not sure how or why this distinction first appeared in UU circles. Perhaps it is related to our historical anti-clerical and anti-religious institutional strains. We also have the bad habit of frequently defining ourselves by what we’re against rather than by what we are.

I find these two issues to represent different approaches to the same uniquely human need for connection – to one another and to that which transcends our mortal existence. This is a journey for spiritual enrichment within a religious context.

UUs are vocal, even vehement, that they are one but not the other. Let’s take a little survey right now. Who among you are religious? Let me see a show of hands. And now, who among you calls yourself spiritual?

My sermon will address these two different but complimentary human longings for the spiritual and religious.

The spiritual for me manifests itself primarily through nature and the physical world around us – things observable that have matter and substance. I would also include manmade structures that have a beauty of function and grace and elegance – the Concorde airplane, for example, or the Statue of Liberty and its embedded symbolism of freedom.

The sources of spirituality and religion have no boundaries or limits. They embrace the theists and humanists alike, even when one might seek to separate themselves from or reject the institutional church as too religious.

Often we think of ourselves as not religious because of a sense of alienation we were made to feel. We became unwilling refugees from religious institutions that rejected us because of our lifestyle, color or gender, theology and dogma at odds with some orthodoxy, etc.

I wonder what a religious institution can learn from those who claim to be one but not the other. Similarly, what kind of critique can those who call themselves religious offer to the discussion centered on spirituality?

This topic has emerged as a “hot” question in liberal churches today. My seminary, Pacific School, is holding a forum in January to discuss this very issue. This coincidence served as the catalyst for this sermon, plus the fact that we frequently hear this expression at UUMAN.

In my view, spirituality pre-dates the origins of religion. It is the universal human impulse that cries out to understand the mysteries of the physical world and the cause for misfortune and natural calamities. Early humans feared and worshiped the sky and seas, the mountains and the creatures within, upon and over them. They grew to believe that all of nature possessed spirits that offered the blessings of nature: rain, sunshine and warmth for crops, animals for food and clothing; but they also believed they were cursed for some reason and suffered: storms and droughts, earthquakes, volcanoes or floods.

Over time, humanity developed a deeper relationship with mystery and nature that grew into the religions we see today. Modern religious institutions help to organize and systematize our spiritual response to our existential fear of living in the face of death, coupled with an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Religion serves to satisfy a need for connection and community as the path to understanding the unknowable; to finding meaning for human existence. Religion created the structure for spiritual searching through the development of rituals to facilitate a deeper connection with the sacred. In most faiths, that process led to a belief in God as the source of wisdom and safety, connection and hope.

To advance this relational process, scriptures were written, a hierarchy developed that set in place a series of rules, dogmas ethics and philosophy that needed to be followed to meet God on his terms. In the process of paving the road to the holy, religion wound up creating a barrier to the direct experience of the holy. It is that I think more than anything else that turned people away from thinking of themselves as religious.

Over time, many faiths also stopped serving the need of humanity when they severed the ties between body and spirit, and still later challenged and rejected the use of intellect to explain the universe – perhaps another reason why UUs don’t want to be considered religious, but are willing to say they are spiritual.

For me, spirituality is the foundation of all religion, all connection to the transient and the permanent, to that which includes all things human yet transcends all existence.

Where organized religions often err is that they focus on the wrong things – the mundane – necessary as they may be, the structural, organizational and finances issues of running a church and not on the spiritual, that which unites, bonds, enriches, empowers, and connects us to the holy. When we “get back to basics,” people will again say they are religious, for they will once again have a safe place where spirituality can reside and thrive.

Religion embodies the practical application of our spiritual nature. It is how we live in the world. It brings to fulfillment our spiritual values, our seven principles that bind us, one to another. It provides some rules for living through the chaos of humanity. It provides the mechanism and structure such as covenants for healthy relationships within the local and global community. Religion codifies our moral and ethical obligations to ourselves and the rest of humanity. These values seem to be religious in application, spiritual in origins. Religion keeps our spiritual lives from being nothing more than self-centered naval gazing.

Spirituality engages the inner journey and religion pushes us to take the journey into the real world. Religion embraces our active conscience to impel us to serve humanity and thus give meaning to our spiritual yearnings. One finds meaning only in the other.

What do you think?