

Spiritual But Not Religious

Rev. Roger Jones, Family Minister
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Unitarian Universalist Society
Sacramento, CA

Hymns: *We Are Children of the Earth, Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor, We Would Be One.*

Reading: #444, *This House*, by Kenneth L. Patton.

Choral Music: *Love Is the Spirit of this Church*, James Vila Blake & Jason Shelton.

Sermon

Online computer dating sites invite you to identify your faith, as well as listing your occupation, income, hobbies, hair color, height and weight. In the religion category of the sites I have seen, the most commonly used label is not a denomination's name, and not Christian, Catholic or Protestant. It's "Spiritual but Not Religious." Many people say this also in casual conversation--"I'm spiritual but not religious." There is no authoritative definition of what people mean by this. I have not read of any study or survey. My guess is that they wish to identify as having a spiritual outlook on life, or a spiritual practice, or a relationship with God. Perhaps they feel humility toward life, or an attitude of gratitude for the gifts of life. Maybe it means they like to hike in the mountains, read poetry, sing gospel songs, hear Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, or visit old cathedrals—just not when there's a church service going on.

When people say "I'm not religious," they may be thinking of dogmas and creeds; rules and commandments; lifeless theologizing; hypocrisy and abuses of power, and preaching that's dull. And let us not forget religious intolerance, repression and violence. Religions have done terrible things. People have done terrible things, acting in the names of religions.

Living in the fourteenth century, Hafiz was an Islamic poet of the Sufi tradition. He wrote this:

The
Great religions are the
Ships,
Poets the life
Boats.
Every sane person I know has jumped
Overboard.ⁱ

A friend of mine is retired from the Christian ministry in a Mainline, moderate denomination. He's a radical environmentalist and a veteran of Civil Rights demonstrations. He's respectful of other faiths and knowledgeable about them. And he has no patience for the phrase "spiritual but not religious." To hold this attitude, he says, is to cut yourself off from history, to be rootless, to be unaware of the source of the modes of spirituality that you hasten to claim. It is to risk falling for the newest fads and latest fashions, he says, to see spirituality as a catalogue item instead of a heritage. My friend writes:

[A man tells me] that he attended a Baptist revival once when he was thirteen and didn't like all the shouting about sin so he never again has had anything to do with Christianity. Well, once I attended a junior high art show when I was thirteen and didn't like the

pictures there, so I never again have looked at art. [He goes on, asking whether he should] stop having anything to do with any college or university because six hundred years ago all their astronomy faculties taught that the sun revolved around the earth, and one hundred years ago all their anthropology faculties taught that blacks were genetically inferior [to whites], and fifty years ago almost all ... were segregated. What enlightened person wants to be associated with such institutions?

My friend can recount the bad stories from religious history, as well as the contributions made by religions. He notes that religious traditions can change, evolve, and even improve. Those of us who choose to identify with a faith tradition have a duty to make it better, to reform and revive it. We have a duty to embody the values and virtues our tradition espouses.

American Unitarians of the nineteenth century took on this duty. I'd like to tell you about three of them. In fact, our big three: William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker. You could say they were the inventors of "spiritual but not religious." To them, religion was not a set of creeds and rules to follow, it was your way of life.

The first generation of Unitarian ministers in the United States were liberal Christians in Boston-area Congregationalist churches. Their faith was Bible-based, yet they said we should use our God-given ability to reason when studying Scriptures. To them, "reason was the friend, not the enemy of faith."ⁱⁱ Their leader was William Ellery Channing. You can see a statue of him in Boston's Public Garden, across from the church he served.

Orthodox Calvinists believed that all human beings were depraved and fallen, and could do nothing to avoid the fiery fate in hell that awaited all but an elect few. Channing and the liberals said no. They believed that all people are created in the likeness of God. Hence, all could grow toward God's goodness and perfection, as Jesus had modeled for us. Channing did not want to fight over points of theology with conservative ministers. That was a distraction from teaching religion as a way of life. Yet as the orthodox ministers continued attacking them as heretics, the Unitarians stood up for themselves. Channing led the charge, giving a sermon as the manifesto of Unitarian Christianity in 1819.

Those liberal ministers got organized in 1825. They grew in number and influence. To them, to be religious was to live sincerely and virtuously. To be religious meant examining your own heart--not for evil, but for the goodness that lives there. It meant showing the goodness in your actions, words, and commitments. Those early Unitarians believed every one of us can cultivate our divine potential. The term used for this approach then was "self-culture." Nowadays people call this "spiritual growth."

Sitting in the pews of Channing's church, and nourished by his preaching, was Ralph Waldo Emerson, a young man whose father had been a Unitarian minister. Waldo's parents had died when he was a child, and he was shaped intellectually and spiritually by his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. Channing tutored Waldo privately before the young man entered Harvard's divinity school. For its day, it was a liberal school, as Unitarians had already taken over its faculty. But for Emerson, the divinity school was lifeless.

He entered parish ministry but didn't enjoy it. After his first wife died of tuberculosis, at age 19, he withdrew from his colleagues. Then he resigned his pulpit. The stated reason was that he did not wish to officiate at the Lord's Supper, or communion. He saw it to be an empty ritual. But for him the whole *church thing* was empty and cold.

Emerson began lecturing and writing essays. He was on fire, and brimming with inspiration. Around him gathered an intellectual circle known as the Transcendentalists. Most

of these people were Unitarians, or had been. They said it is not necessary to be Christian to be religious. It isn't necessary to believe in a supernatural deity to be religious. They emphasized the use of reason, but they celebrated personal intuition more. They tossed out the Holy Bible, or tossed out the idea that the Bible was the primary source of religious truth. The primary sources must be your personal experience, your own soul, and the world around you. They said the word of God is too plentiful and fresh to be bound in one book for all time.

Emerson preached not a religion of the church, but "religion of the soul," in the words of my colleague Jay Deacon. Instead of a remote God, Emerson felt and imagined a Power that connects us all, and which comes from within each of us. He said that in each of us is "the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle equally related; the eternal One."ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1838 the graduating divinity school class at Harvard invited Emerson to give the commencement address, and he accepted. To these new ministers, the ex-minister recounted the corruptions of the Christian church over the centuries, and those of their own church. Conventional Unitarians still accepted the New Testament accounts of the miracles of Jesus as true—to them the miracles were evidence that Jesus was a messenger of God. Emerson condemned this as a monstrous idea. Supernatural tricks have nothing to do with miracle. A miracle is a flower blowing in the wind, or the roaring ocean waves.

Emerson said we can't rely on others to tell us what God is, or who we are. Everyone must get acquainted "first hand" with the Spirit of Life. He urged the students: Have your own experience of God, and be brave enough to tell your congregations about it. Preach a new message, speak your own gospel. Don't rely on old ways or old words of theologians and preachers, even the ones you admire.

He meant only to challenge the complacency of the students and their professors. According to scholar Gary Dorrien, Emerson meant to light a fire. Instead he caused a "firestorm." One Harvard professor called his address "the latest form of infidelity." The scandal of it gave orthodox critics one more weapon with which to attack the Unitarians.

Emerson was not invited back to speak at Harvard for 27 years. Yet he continued to shape the religious life of the Unitarian churches—and of the nation--as "students, and ministers and throngs of laypeople were reading his essays and going to hear his lectures."^{iv}

Sitting in the audience for the Divinity School Address was the new graduate Theodore Parker. In his journal that night, he wrote that Emerson's "picture of the faults of the church" was "so beautiful, so just, so true." Parker took from Emerson the call to a wider circle of religious concern, and he took it further. Parker is famous in our history for his radical abolitionism against American slavery and his opposition to the Mexican War and the government's mistreatment of Native American tribes.^v

In his day, Parker became infamous after giving an address called "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." This was 1840, 11 years after Emerson's address, and 21 years after Channing's Unitarian Christianity sermon. Emerson had celebrated Jesus as a spiritual teacher, just not the only spiritual teacher. Parker now said that Jesus was a great soul, to be sure. But what mattered was not Jesus himself, but the lessons he taught, the spiritual and moral principles he embodied. Those principles are timeless. They would be just as good if they had come from a mathematician in Athens as from Jesus of Nazareth.

We need no church, we need no Jesus, to tell us what is good. We know from our intuition and reason what values are true and lasting, Parker said. The rituals and forms of Christianity are transient; they will fall apart. The true spirit will persist. Rebellious words, for Boston in 1840!

Since Channing's day, conservatives had been calling the Unitarian church "a halfway house to infidelity." Now, orthodox ministers used Parker's heresy to embarrass the Unitarians. Under this pressure, many of Parker's colleagues avoided him, refusing pulpit exchanges with him, some not even speaking to him.^{vi}

Consider a Unitarian Universalist congregation as a halfway house now. What's our program? What do we offer? I think as a halfway house we try to show the way beyond separateness and spiritual isolation, the way to true connection, authentic fellowship, and a sense of belonging. We encourage every person to self-knowledge and self-expression. We strive to offer, and we seek to receive, the courage to find our personal calling and purpose in the world, and the courage to live out that purpose.

Ralph Waldo Emerson compared each human life to a ship starting on a journey. He asked: "Why should each new soul that is launched out of God into Nature be wrecked at the beginning of the voyage by following the charts of its mates instead [of] the compass, the stars, and the continents?"

For Emerson's time of stale conformity, rigid social rules and unoriginal thinking, it was good advice. It still is good advice. Yet looking at my own life as a journey on the sea, I wonder what I'd be without the wisdom of other people's experience from their journeys. Where would I be without the friends who taught the stars to me, the mentors who showed me how to use a compass, the travelers who brought news of continents worth exploring. Where would I be without, the sailboat skipper who said, "Here, take the wheel," and then stood by me as I tried it out? Where and who would I be without them?

I believe the best way to find courage and a sense of connection is by joining with others, joining by our own free will, making our own decision. In community, we practice our values. We find that living by our values can take work. We need support, and the good examples of other good people who come seeking their own purpose and their own sense of connection.

Moral principles and ethical values matter. Yet values must be embodied for them to make a difference in our world. Values need structures and platforms. It is by institutions that values are carried from generation to generation. Such institutions are families, homes and schools; businesses, governments and unions; congregations and voluntary membership associations of all kinds. People do challenge their institutions, call them to account, and reform them. People will even found new institutions to replace the outworn and lifeless ones.

Institutions carry values from one generation to the next. For better and for worse, religious institutions also embody values and carry principles forward. Together, here, let us decide to make it for the better. For the better! Amen.

ⁱ Daniel Ladinsky, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz the Great Sufi Master*. New York: Penguin Compass, 1999, p. 177. Quoted and cited by Jay Deacon.

ⁱⁱ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, p. 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jay Deacon, *Magnificent Journey: Religion As a Lock on the Past or Engine of Evolution*. Westminster, MA: Ground Wave Publishing, 2011, p. 62.

^{iv} Deacon, p. 72.

^v Deacon, p. 65.

^{vi} Dorrien, p. 88.