

A BETTER WAY TO BE RELIGIOUS

A Sermon by Robert M. Eddy
delivered 26 September 1999

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Pensacola

Four years ago when Bob Eddy was interim minister in Indianapolis, he preached three sermons on "UUism". He asked and answered three questions.

1. Is religion a social disease?
2. Is UUism a Religion? And
3. What is our peculiar way of being religious?

We'll try to answer all three questions in about twenty-five minutes this morning. It's necessary to ask the first question because there are some UU's who agree with Didrot, the French revolutionary who wrote, about 230 years ago, "Men will never be free until the last king is strangled in the entrails of the last priest". Well that's rather severe. We must recognize that many religions (plural), that is establishments of religion - have been instruments by which power elites have enlisted the masses in their own subjugation. But we must also recognize that religion (singular) has often been the way in which courageous leaders have mobilized the oppressed to throw off their shackles. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King are examples from recent history.

So what is this strange characteristic of our species that can be used both to oppress and to liberate? It is, religion is, "The response of the deepest strata of human being to the exigencies of temporal existence." That's a definition from depth psychology. On the individual level religion is what we do with our consciousness that we will eventually die ..." temporal existence." On the sociological level a religion is a social expression of a particular culture's answers to the questions religious people ask. Why am I here? Why do I suffer? What is virtue? Why is there evil in the world? And other such radical questions that go to the root of the meaning of life. Most individuals accept with relatively little thought the majority religion of their culture. In fact for many that religion defines their culture. They say, "Iran is a Moslem Republic" or "The United States is a Christian nation." an assertion which you could probably hear from many pulpits this morning. Of course, we know that America is not a Christian nation. The United States is a nation in which many religions coexist with none given the imprimatur of the state. Is UUism, one of those religions?

Well, six years ago the Unitarian Universalist Association launched a marketing campaign with the slogan, "UUism: The religion that puts its faith in you". The British Unitarian Association prints bookmarks which say, "Unitarianism, the creedless religion which says that people ought to think for themselves." If you go to the UUA web site - UUA.ORG - and click on the link, "What is Unitarian Universalism?" You'll read "Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion, born of the Jewish and Christian traditions. . . . We believe that personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion." Now if one could cram four plus centuries of history into a few words, any of those brief statements might do. It's true; we do put our faith in

people. It's true: we do believe that people ought to think for themselves. And yes, we believe that personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion. But all three of these summaries have a fatal flaw: "Unitarian Universalism" is not a religion. And for that I thank whatever gods or goddesses there may be. The world doesn't need another religion. What the world desperately needs is a better way for people to be religious. And that's what, I believe, UUism is: a better way to be religious, a way that encourages diverse individuals to be honestly religious in community. Each UU is developing his or her own unique religion, a religion built out of his or her own unique individual life experiences and his or her rational reflection thereon. We do not share a religion; we do share a very unusual - in fact a rather peculiar way - of being religious.

My religion is not Unitarian Universalism. If I were to give my religion a name I might call it "Doug Abbottism" or better "Doug Abbottism 4 November 2001 at 10:?? a.m. My religion is constantly evolving - as is yours. My religion is unique; as a UU I don't have to accept anybody else's religion to belong, because UU congregations practice a way of being religious that is very different from the ways of most other religious communities

More than a century ago Edwin Markham, a Universalist poet, wrote: "He drew a circle to shut me out; Heretic, Rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle that took him in."

That little quatrain expresses the essence of our way of being religious and what I have to say from here on out is simply an exposition of what Markham wrote. I'll do this in two ways: first by contrasting our way of being religious with three other ways and secondly by suggesting three important characteristics of our peculiar way of being religious.

What are some other ways of being religious - ways that differ from UUism as it exists in these first years of the 21th century?

The first way is the Shaman's Way. The second way is the orthodox Way. The third way of being religious is the Latitudinarian Way. I don't view these other ways of being religious as without merit or more primitive, but I do believe in all honesty that "our way of being religious" is a better way.

Like the UU way of being religious, each of the other ways of being religious has been expressed both positively and negatively. And each of these other ways of being religious has contributed to our institutional history, but none of these is our contemporary way, the UU way of being religious:

The first non-UU way of being religious is the Shaman's way. A shaman is a person who believes he or she has a message directly from God (with a capital G) or a god or goddess. The Shaman hears a voice and feels compelled to say, "Thus Saith the Lord." In the Jewish traditions these shamans were called "Prophets". The shamans of the ancient Hebrews - like the shamans of non-literate societies today - heard a voice; sometimes a 'still small voice' sometimes a roaring from the whirlwind but a voice nonetheless; a voice that ordered them to proclaim "The Word of the Lord". Then as now there were true and false prophets. By "true prophets" I don't mean those who really heard a god or goddess and by "false prophets" I don't mean those who didn't really hear the god or goddess. What I mean by "false prophets" are those who simply

told the people what they wanted to hear. The true prophets, whose sayings have been preserved in the Hebrew Bible "spoke truth to power". True prophets condemned the iniquities and injustices of the Kings of their day. Sometimes the Kings repented. More often the kings simply killed the prophets.

Jesus of Nazareth was a true prophet. He "Spoke Truth to Power". The history of Christianity is filled with people who believed they had heard the voice of God, or the Virgin Mary, or one of the Saints - and they felt compelled to "speak truth to power" - nearly always to the dismay of the religious establishment of their day. Examples could be drawn from all the world's religions, because the Shaman's way is found in every religious tradition. In fact, most religious reformers were shamans; they heard what they believed to be a divine voice and said, "Thus saith the lord"

People have always heard voices. Sometimes we call these people crazy. Sometimes they are crazy; that is their brains are damaged. But sometimes they are listening to what might be called "the God within". Now when I use the term "God within" I am referring to a function of human consciousness; something deeper than the individual ego; something that says for example, you don't deliberately hurt people. You might call it conscience. You can be an atheist and believe in that kind of "God within" even if you prefer not to call it "God." There are literally thousands of women and men today who practice the Shamanist's way of being religious. The best are traditional Quakers. The worst are some of the so-called Charismatic Christian preachers. In between are new age "channellers."

Lets look at a second way of being religious: THE ORTHODOX WAY. Shamans say "Thus says the lord"; present tense. The orthodox say "Thus said the Lord"; past tense. Those who practice the orthodox way of being religious insist that revelation is sealed. They make of one shaman the last, the ultimate shaman. Islam is a good example. Bahai is another. Christianity is a third. Instead of trying to hear the same voice that their shamans heard, the orthodox take the teachings of a shaman, as written down by his disciples, and use them as a guide for believing and acting. Our way is not the orthodox way, though Unitarianism and Universalism both started out as orthodoxies. Both claimed to be the only correct interpretation of the words of the last prophet, Jesus of Nazareth.

Several positive things can be said for the orthodox way of being religious:

1. Through a common set of beliefs, rituals and religious authorities it allows a disparate collection of individuals to come together as one people, avoiding alienation and narcissism.
2. The orthodox way is often the means by which a people survives when under attack. Orthodox Judaism is the most venerable example. It has enabled the people of Israel to survive for twenty-five centuries. Catholicism in Poland is an example from more recent history.
3. The orthodox way of being religious gives scope and shape to the creative impulse. How much poorer would we be without the music of J.S. Bach or the paintings of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

But there is a pathology of the orthodox way of being religious about which I can say nothing good. It is called Fundamentalism. Fundamentalists say not only that their prophets proclaimed the truth. Fundamentalists also say, "Any one who does not believe as I do is evil and should be denied the rights that we, the true believers, enjoy." Fundamentalism is found in

every orthodox religious community. We are reminded daily of examples of Moslem and Christian Fundamentalism, but Fundamentalism exists in Shinto, Hinduism, even in Buddhism. Fundamentalism is a cancer on the soul of orthodox religion. It must be distinguished from the more common, the more tolerant forms of orthodoxy. We Unitarian Universalists need to join hands with the tolerant orthodox of all religions in fighting Fundamentalism. To lump the tolerant orthodox with Fundamentalists only does harm to the causes both Universalist and orthodox people support. The orthodox are sometimes our best allies. The fundamentalists are our common enemies. There is much to be said for the orthodox way when it escapes the temptation of Fundamentalism.

But the orthodox way is not our way. Though some may confuse the principles and purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association with a creed; the hallmark of orthodoxy. But that's another sermon. There is a third non-UU way of being religious. I call it: THE LATITUDINARIAN WAY. Shamans say, "Thus Says the Lord". The orthodox say "Thus said the Lord through his Prophet". Latitudinarians say, "Thus said the Lord through his prophet, ... but what he really meant was". Practitioners of the latitudinarian way of being religious take a tradition and stretch it to mean something the thoughtful individual can believe though he or she disbelieves the literal content of the tradition. A Latitudinarian can say "Oh yes, I believe in God", but by "God" she will mean something very different than what the questioner assumed. The ground rules for Latitudinarians, is, don't ask and don't tell. A Latitudinarian Christian is able to say the Apostles Creed without believing in the literal resurrection of the dead or even in a transcendent god. Latitudinarianism is a way of avoiding intellectual indigestion while sitting at a great feast with the orthodox. Episcopalian do this with great style. Much good can be said of the Latitudinarian way of being religious, but Latitudinarianism can be dangerous to one's integrity.

Bob Eddy served as a Methodist minister for a while. And in that capacity he practiced Latitudinarianism every day. Eventually he came to see himself as a hypocrite. When he could no longer do that he left the Methodist ministry. Most latitudinarian clergy in orthodox churches don't have the problem he did. They feel Latitudinarianism serves a higher value and they may be right. They say, "After all, in these matters it's all metaphor anyway." They may be right and we shouldn't accuse our latitudinarian friends of hypocrisy. However Latitudinarianism is not the UU way of being religious.

So far I've been defining our way of being religious negatively - by saying what it is not. Can we be more positive and say what it is? Our hymnal contains literally dozens of attempts to describe succinctly "Our Way of Being Religious". The words that we sing to the tune "Onward Christian Soldiers" is an example. Let me lay out for you one more vision of what our way of being religious really is; in positive not negative terms. I can describe it with three adverbs. The proper question is not "What is our UU religion?", the question is "How are we religious?" The answer is we are religious INCLUSIVELY, DYNAMICALLY and COVENANTALLY.

The Universalist way is INCLUSIVE. Ours is a way of being religious that cherishes, celebrates and cultivates diversity. Each UU states what he or she believes individually, as clearly and unequivocally as possible. It is proper to say many UU's believe this way, or most UU's believe that way or few UU's believe this way. It is never proper to say or imply that "all UU's believe this way." If you study Unitarian and Universalist history you find each generation doubting the wisdom of the last generation. And it's true even today. Many of us came into the movement in the 60's. We challenged the Theism of our elders with our non-theistic Humanism. Within a

few years we non-theistic humanists were in the majority. Now that we are elders, our non-theistic Humanism is being challenged by Pagan UU's and post modern Christian UU's. So has it always been. So, I hope, will it always be. Every religious community has its doubters, its heretics. What distinguishes our way of being religious from most others is that we do not expel our heretics. That is a most significant difference. That is what has made us what we are today: fellowships of tolerant - well mostly tolerant - seekers who practice their diverse religions honestly. We have kept our heretics and learned to cherish them- well most of them. That's the first characteristic of our way of being religious that I'd like you to remember - We are inclusive.

Historically the first characteristic led to the second characteristic. Because we do not expel our doubters, our way of being religious is DYNAMIC. We are always moving on. Not surprisingly there has always been resistance to this moving on. There have been and there will always be those who say, "We've gone far enough; there are certain fundamentals that must be believed for a person to become or remain a member of our religious community." Let me give you just one historical illustration: In 1886 a Unitarian minister, Jabez T. Sunderland circulated a pamphlet among his colleagues in response to a proposal which another Unitarian minister, Rev. Gannett, had made at the previous annual meeting of the Western Unitarian Conference. Gannett's proposal was that belief in God should no longer be required of Unitarian Ministers. Rev. Sunderland was horrified. "Is Western Unitarianism ready to give up its ...Theistic Character?", he wrote. "Are we ready to declare that those great [beliefs]: in God, [in] prayer, [in] immortality and [in] the spiritual leadership of Jesus, which have always in the past been at the very heart of Unitarianism, [Are we prepared to say that these] are no longer essential to our movement? ..."

Rev. Gannett tells us that the denomination first took its stand on "reason and revelation," but it had to move on. Later it took its stand at the supernatural or the miraculous; but it had to move on. Later still it made another stand at the Lordship of Christ, but again it was compelled to move on. Now the stand is made at Christian Theism, but once more, he says, we must move on. Move on where? If I am facing toward the edge of the Grand Canyon, I can safely move on for a distance - move on until I am within 20 feet of the edge, 15 feet, 10 feet, 5 feet, one foot - but if I move on much beyond that it will likely be the last moving on I do in this world.

Well, for better or for worse, we did move on. The Western Unitarian Conference said that it would let each individual decide whether the edge is really "the Grand Canyon" or simply a new embarkation point. They refused to eject any minister on the grounds that she or he had gone too far out in front of the majority.

To review our progress so far: The UU way of being religious is not the shaman's way, not the orthodox way, not the latitudinarian's way. Our way is first of all inclusive. We do not expel dissenters. Our way is, secondly, dynamic; we are always moving on. And, finally, our way is covenantal. Our predecessors in this way of being religious sought the good, the true and the beautiful as all religious people do; but they did not do it in isolation. They didn't go sit under a tree and wait for inspiration. They were members of a religious community. They committed themselves to one another through a covenant. Maybe some of you remember ads that used to be run by the Unitarian Layman's League headed, "Are You a Unitarian without knowing it?" Many people are UU's in the sense that they do believe in diversity and tolerance but at a safe distance. These people answer UU when asked by pollsters for their religious affiliation but they do not belong to a congregation. I have come to believe that one can't really be a Unitarian Universalist without knowing it. One can't really be a Unitarian Universalist without belonging to a

UU congregation. Until one makes a commitment to a religious community and participates in it's life, he or she isn't really practicing our way of being religious. He's merely admiring it. I believe that our way of being religious requires commitment to community.

When Bob Eddy entered the UU ministry thirty six years ago, he gloried in the practice of having the membership book available every Sunday and inviting even first time visitors to sign if they wished. But now he believes that was a mistake, an overreaction to the exclusionism in which he, like many of us, was raised. The result of this attitude has been the revolving door syndrome. A situation where people join, stay a year or two then disappear while a core group stays on for years maintaining the bearings upon which the door revolves. Eventually they die or wear out and the church collapses. Hundreds of thousands of people joined our churches in the sixties and seventies, stayed a couple years and then dropped out. We made membership insignificant so people disjoined as easily as they had joined. Eddy thinks of church membership in the Victorian sense. In those long gone days, the word "member" was used to indicate a part of the body. Becoming a member of a Christian Church meant becoming part of the body of Christ, a serious decision indeed. Joining a UU congregation should also be a serious decision. One should spend at least as much time deciding to join this church as one would in choosing a new car. More and more of our congregations now require "informed consent" before allowing a person to sign the membership book. They make a great effort to be sure that all who join know what it they're getting into. They know the difference between a member and a friend. At the same time of course we don't want to give the impression that everyone who attends services or participates in other activities of the congregation are not welcome. If you are in that category you are more than welcome, friend. Lord knows we need all the friends we can get, that is people who belong to no religious community but who would belong here if they belonged anywhere. Some of our friends are even generous in their financial support - but there should be a crucial difference between being a friend of the congregation and a member of the congregation. A member is one who has accepted the covenant that defines the congregation.

In many religious communities, the covenant is handed down from the ancestors or from some central authority. Unitarian Universalist covenants are crafted by each congregation - and renewed periodically. A covenant is something different from an affirmation of things generally believed among us – that's another useful document. But the covenant is far more important. It is what we promise one another and it deals more with behaviors than with belief. A UU congregation should be something more than a gathering of individuals; something more than an audience for a preacher, something more than a debating society. A UU congregation should be a loving Community of honest, tolerant and caring individuals who, in the words of Shelly Jackson Denham's hymn, believe in life, and laugh and sing and dance together.