

Religion Beyond Belief - Dec. 19/10

This is a sermon by The Rev. Peter Morales, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He was elected in 2009.

“In the congregation I served in Colorado, and as I have traveled

across the country, I have heard hundreds of stories of people who

came to Unitarian Universalism as adults.

The first story is perhaps the most typical, especially for people of my

generation. People tell me stories of feeling driven from the religious

traditions in which they were raised because they simply could no

longer believe the teachings. In fact, our congregations serve as

religious refugee centers for doubters and heretics. I know this story

well, for it is my story, too. Millions have felt abandoned by the

religious communities in which they were raised. When they were

very young, the church was a kind of extended family. It was a place

where they belonged, where they were accepted, where they felt

safe. However, there was a price of admission. They had to pretend

to believe what they found unbelievable. When they couldn't do it any

longer, they were told they no longer fit. Many of us left all religion

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behind. I wonder how many millions of people there are in America

who have left the church in which they were raised and have become

bitter and anti-religious?

There is a newer story I am hearing more and more often. The new

story is the tale of a younger generation, particularly for people under

40. They come to us seeking something more than a life spent

pursuing success. They have no bad memories of indoctrination and

rigidity. They do not come seeking refuge from orthodoxy.
They come

seeking community and a spiritual home that is a refuge
from banality

and emptiness.

Those who grew up Unitarian Universalist tell a yet different
story.

Theirs is a story of growing up with freedom from rigidity—
perhaps

too much freedom. They seek depth, something to which
they can

anchor their lives. If they are not imprisoned by rigid
orthodoxy, they

are sometimes adrift in a relativistic sea. They want
something more

than a religion that is “none of the above.”

We come to liberal religion by different paths, yet there is
one basic

notion that almost all of us share with the most conservative,

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reactionary and fundamentalist religious extremists. It is an
idea that

we also share, ironically enough, with hard-core atheists who
are

opposed to all religion. Almost all of us have accepted the notion that

religion is about what we believe.

The first question most people ask about a religion is, "What do they

believe?" So we get questions like, "So what do you Unitarian

Universalists believe, anyway? Is it true you can just believe anything

you want?" When someone asks us what Unitarian Universalists

believe, we tend to give answers that are long, vague, and tedious.

We aren't comfortable with the question. We squirm. We fidget. We

struggle. Often we talk about what we *don't* believe. The trouble is

that we treat the question, "What do you believe?" as an obvious and

natural question. After all, religion is about what we believe --- isn't it?

No! No. Religion is not about what you or I or Baptists or Catholics or

Jews or Muslims or Hindus *believe*. I would even go a giant step

further: *Belief is the enemy of religion*. Let me repeat that:
Belief is
the enemy of religion.

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Perhaps I should explain.... We are so immersed in a culture that

views religion as a matter of what people believe that we think this

is the way it has always been. *It hasn't*. All of this emphasis on what

someone believes is actually very modern and very western.

I sometimes cite an extreme example to make this point. No one

objects to calling Buddhism a religion. Yet Buddhism has no theology

at all, in the way we use the word. Buddhists don't believe anything;

at least not anything that is a set of propositions. Buddhism doesn't

even have a god, in the usual sense.

But, of course, Buddhism might strike us as a bit esoteric and foreign.

Well, let's take a look at the religious culture out of which many of us

came — the Christian and Jewish traditions. Jews have never had

anything like a creed, a statement of belief.... Ironically, Jesus, about

whom there are all sorts of creeds, probably never encountered a

creed in his life. The whole idea of a creed would have been foreign.

Jews did have a definite sense of God, to be sure. However, the key

to the God of the Jews is that he had a covenant with the people and

gave the Hebrew people the law. The Hebrew scriptures never show

any interest in what people believe. The scriptures show a lot of

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interest in what people *do*. They are supposed to love God and obey

the commandments. The great prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mica,

Amos, Ezekiel — were concerned with justice, compassion and being

faithful to the covenant. They had *no* interest in doctrine.

The early Christian communities, while they did show more concern

with what people believed, actually tolerated a *lot* of variety.

Islam, the next great religious movement, also has little theology. Its

statement of faith is that there is no God but God and that

Mohammed is his prophet. This is a way of insisting, as did the Jews,

that there is only one God. And this is another way of saying that we

all owe allegiance to a common source; we are all one people. The

great emphasis in Islam was with what the faithful are supposed to

do, not what they are supposed to think.

All the emphasis on religion as belief does not come on the scene

until much later. It started with the Catholic Church and its creeds, but

it really got intense with the Reformation. All of this emphasis on

religion being about believing the right things is really a modern

development. Even the whole idea of belief has gotten twisted. The

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word used to be used in a very different way. "Belief" once meant

"what I give my heart to" or "what I commit myself to".
Belief was

linked to emotion and action. Belief did not mean agreeing with a set

of metaphysical or theological propositions. Actually, even in religions

that emphasize belief, beliefs change over time. It is no longer heresy

to believe that the sun is the center of the solar system. Today the

Catholic Church accepts evolution. So one can be a faithful Catholic

today by believing what a Catholic would have been excommunicated

for believing a few centuries ago. Lots of American Protestant

churches once taught that slavery was God's plan.

Even in the religions that care the most about what people believe,

beliefs change. Yet the religion goes on and on. So a religion is not

simply what its followers believe.

Yet I want to make a more radical point. The point is that religious

belief is actually the *enemy* of religion. Every major religious tradition

seeks to impart a sense of wonder, mystery, awe and humility. Belief

systems stop this cold. Belief systems start where our thinking stops.

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Once we think we have explained it all, once we think we have all the

answers, our minds close and we become arrogant, belligerent and

defensive. Just look at what happens when a belief system takes

hold. What follows is truly horrible. First, we categorize everyone who

does not agree with us as either ignorant or evil. If we have *the* truth,

and are certain we have it, then our task in life becomes spreading

this truth. Our task also becomes defending the truth from all of those

who disagree. Believers have enemies everywhere. The world

becomes a battleground. This is the world of Muslim fundamentalists

blowing up innocent people and of Christian fundamentalists trying to

criminalize gays and lesbians. This is the world of John Calvin

burning Michael Servetus alive because Servetus did not agree with

the doctrine of the trinity. This is the world of the Spanish Inquisition.

Once a religion becomes an all encompassing belief system, murder

will surely follow. Believers are dangerous. They always have been.

So, if religion isn't really about what we believe, then what is it about?

Can we be religious without a belief system? I am convinced that

religion without belief is true religion. Religion that is focused on belief

is a dangerous corruption of true religion. Religion without belief is not

phony religion. It isn't fake religion or pretend religion or partial

religion or religion lite.

I have heard critics of liberal religion complain that ours is a church

where people can believe anything they want. Actually, that is not

true. I cannot truly believe anything I want. I would love to believe that

I will live to be 900 years old and will play professional baseball.

What is important about liberal religion is that you and I don't have to

pretend to believe what we don't believe. We don't have to lie. But

most importantly, we don't get caught up in endless ridiculous

debates about whose beliefs are correct.

The problem with asking what someone believes is that --- *it is the*

wrong question.

True religion is about what we love, not about what we think.
True

religion is about what you and I hold sacred. The practice of
true

religion is faithfulness to what we love. The key religious
questions

you and I must answer are these: What do we love so much
that we

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are moved to tears? What gives us unspeakable joy? What
gives us

peace beyond understanding? What do we love so much that
it calls

us to action? What do we care about so deeply that we
willingly,

enthusiastically, devote our lives to it?

When we focus on what we truly love, we ask life's essential

questions. We ask questions like, "How shall I live?" When
we ask

the question together in community, it becomes, "How shall
we live

together? What shall we do together?" When we focus on
what we

truly love, we discover something wonderful: we discover that we love

the same things. We realize that we need one another. We want to

be compassionate and gentle with one another. We want to raise

children who are kind, content and responsible. We aspire to create a

religious community where we can come to know one another more

deeply. We want to create a place where we can cry together, laugh

together, sing together, learn together, and act together. We want a

place where we can come together to remind ourselves of what is

truly worthwhile.

That is what worship is—it is literally an affirmation of worth.

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As a brief aside I would like to mention that defining worship as

“ the celebration of life” brings us very close to the original Anglo-

Saxon root word “worthship” which meant to ascribe worth to that

which was valued most in life.....

We want to make a difference in the world. We are not content to be

a club. We know there are hundreds, thousands, of neighbors who

love what we love. And if they love what we love, they have the same

religion we do. We open our hearts and our doors to them.

Religion beyond belief is the religion millions of people long for. It is

religion that transcends culture, race and class. It is religion where we

can grow spiritually, a religion where we can forge deep and lasting

relationships, a religion where we can join hands to help heal a

broken world.

The central issue before us, as a religious movement, is not to decide

what we believe. That will just set us to arguing among ourselves until

the theological cows come home. (Trust me, the theological cows

have been gone for millennia and they're not coming home
in our

lifetime.)

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No, the central issue before us all is whether we will accept
the

challenge to become a religion beyond belief.

We live at a time when religious tribalism kills people every
day.

Fundamentalists try to force their beliefs on others. Millions
upon

millions want no part of that kind of religion. Yet the options
offered by

secular consumer culture are empty. People know that
consumerism

is a false god. Modern society, with its mobility, has eroded
the

network of relationships that gave people a deep sense of
belonging

and transcendence.

Rigorous studies in social psychology show us that modern

Americans are the most emotionally isolated people who
have ever

lived. People, millions of them, seek a religious community where

they can nurture relationships, raise children, deepen spiritually, and

serve a mission that is worthy of their highest ideals. What these

millions are seeking is a religion beyond belief. We can be that

religion. We can feed the starving multitudes. This is our challenge in

each and every congregation, and in our Association. Just as we are

relational creatures who need one another to become our true selves,

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so too do our congregations need one another to become a powerful

force for compassion and justice. There is so much more we could be

doing. Just think of the possibilities if we work together, hand in hand.

Just think of the possibilities across this land.

Yours is an important congregation. I ask you to think about how you

might take an even more important leadership role, how you can join

forces with other congregations. The possibilities are breathtaking.

This is our spiritual and religious challenge: We must know what we

love. And then we must let that love guide us. This, my friends, is true

religion. It is not really religion *without* belief. It is religion *beyond*

belief. It is a religion to be lived and experienced. This is the religion

our world so desperately needs. This, I am convinced, is what we are

called to be.

I leave you with this simple prayer:

May true religion, the religion of what we love, guide us today and

always. Let us create a religion beyond belief.

So may it be. Amen.”