

**“What’s a Liberal Religious Community For?”**  
**Peninsula Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Burley, Washington**  
**June 10, 2012**

**Introduction to Responsive Reading**

Our responsive reading today is the same one I used a little over a year ago in February, the first time that I spoke here. It’s written by Dr. David O. Rankin, the senior minister with whom I served as an associate minister for over fifteen years at the large, liberal, unaffiliated Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. To my mind, this is about as fine a summary statement as you will find on the values, principles, and processes of the liberal approach in religion.

I remember speaking with David about the origin of this series of ten statements. He wrote it, he told me, as an attempt to summarize the commonly-held principles and values of religious liberals, having surveyed those who identified themselves as such. It’s one expression among others of the approach to religion found among members of Unitarian Universalist congregations and religious liberals in general.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theologies, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, not only possess an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.

MINISTER: We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official; but the personal choice and decision of the individual.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the never-ending search for truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting.

MINISTER: We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice; and no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.

MINISTER: We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural product of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace which finds completion in social and community involvement.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.

MINISTER: We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism, so that people might govern themselves.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support. (David O. Rankin)

## **“WHAT’S A LIBERAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY FOR?”**

### **Introduction**

On this special day as you take an important step forward toward becoming your own Unitarian Universalist congregation, I’d like to talk with you about the role and potential value of organized religion in our lives, and, in particular, about the role and potential value of a *liberal* religious institution in our lives, such as would be represented by this Unitarian Universalist congregation.

### **We are religious creatures**

Let me begin with a couple of points that give the broad framework and provide the larger context for the role of organized religion in our lives. It’s quite simple and goes like this:

We humans are religious creatures – all of us – because we are a species that has evolved to a point where we have to question:

how we should live,  
what we should value and commit ourselves to,  
what meaning and purpose, if any, may be ascribed to our lives,  
and how we are related to this vast universe in which we find ourselves.

Thus, the quintessential religious questions are these:

To what should I ultimately devote myself?  
To what should I give my highest allegiance?  
To what should I bring my deepest reverence?

Religion, as retired Unitarian Universalist minister Dr. Richard Gilbert says, has to do with “that core of ultimate meanings, values, and convictions to which we commit our lives.” ([Building Your Own Theology, Volume 1: Introduction](#), p. xiii)

Or, again, philosopher of religion professor Frederick Ferre puts it this way, saying, “Religion is one’s way of *valuing* most comprehensively and intensively.” (In contrast, Ferre describes philosophy as “one’s way of *thinking* most comprehensively and critically.”)

### **The part and the whole**

Or, again: the quintessential religious questions may be said to be questions of the relationship of the part and whole, namely:

How am I, the part, related to the whole?  
How am I part of the whole? How is the whole part of me?  
How do I serve the whole? How do I serve the part?

The word “religion” itself, in its etymology, fits in nicely here – and delightfully so to me. Modern scholars, such as Joseph Campbell, believe that the word “religion” comes from the Latin “*religio*,” which in turn is related to the Latin, “*ligare*,” which means “to bind, to link, to connect.” Then, you add the little prefix “*re*” to “*ligare*” to get “*re-ligare*,” and, thus, you have “to re-connect,” “to re-bind,” “to re-link.”

So, here, the religious quest has to do with re-connecting ourselves to that from which we have become separated.

### **Organized religion**

Religion, then, organized religion, comes into being in order to attend to these “religious” questions – these questions of ultimate meaning, value, devotion, commitment, and relatedness. That’s what religion is – or should be – about, first of all.

Now, it seems to me, there are a couple of implications that follow from this:

First, we don’t become religious by belonging to some religious organization or another; rather, we are religious by nature, whether or not we are part of a religious organization.

Secondly, because organized religion is meant to serve our quest as religious creatures, our ultimate allegiance ought not be to the religious institution but to the religious quest. To paraphrase a statement of Jesus, “The religious organization is made for humans, not humans for the religious organization.”

### **A statement of the Dalai Lama**

In this regard, I'm particularly fond of a statement by the current Dalai Lama in which he says that "kindness is my *true* religion."

Here's the leader of Tibetan Buddhism saying that it's not Buddhism that is ultimately important for him, but the value of kindness or lovingkindness. Now, hopefully, his Buddhist religion helps him with the practice of lovingkindness; but if not, then bag the religion, because religion is properly to be a servant, not a master – important, perhaps, but not ultimately important.

In my own case, I first became a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation – the Church of the Larger Fellowship – in the mid-1970's, and I have valued that membership very much. But even as a minister serving a Unitarian Universalist congregation, my first allegiance is not to organized religion. Unitarian Universalism is not my true religion; my true religion has to do with the religious philosophy and values for living, which, hopefully, my organized religion assists me with.

And so my argument this afternoon for supporting a religious institution such as this one is based on the understanding that it is here as a valuable aid in our religious quest as human beings. It is here as servant, not master. This, then, is the broad framework in which organized religion operates.

### **An overview of religion**

Next, I'd like to look, in a general way, at the functions that organized religion plays in life, and how our Unitarian Universalist congregations are part of that general religious enterprise.

I sometimes find that persons in liberal religious institutions, in their need and desire to put some distance between themselves and more orthodox religious institutions, often overlook the *common* elements and structures that underlie *both* liberal and orthodox religious institutions.

So let me give you a very brief summary of the typical roles, functions, and purposes that religions world-wide play in the lives of individuals and communities, whether those religions are literal or liberal, creedal or non-creedal.

For this summary, I'm turning to a very fine scholar of world religions with the unusual name of Ninian Smart. Dr. Smart – aptly named, I believe – is the author of a very fine comparative study of religion titled, The Religious Experience of Mankind. And, more recently on the same general topic, he has written, Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs.

In the introduction to The Religious Experience of Mankind, Dr. Smart refers to religion as a "six-dimensional organism." That is, in his analysis of religions throughout history and the world, he finds that they typically involve six different dimensions of human reality and experience. I only have time to just very briefly summarize them, though

previously, I have given whole sermons on each of these different dimensions, indicating how each dimension applies in liberal religious organizations.

So here are six dimensions of organized religion, typically found in all religions of whatever orientation:

### **1) The ritual dimension**

First, there is the “ritual dimension” of religion in which we give outer form to inner feeling, such as we are doing in this service today – a special time and place set apart from our everyday life.

### **2) The mythological dimension**

Secondly, there is the “mythological dimension” of religion, which has to do with the central stories that we tell to make sense of our lives. Myth, here, does not imply one way or the other whether the story is historically actual or historically fictional. The function of myth in religion, says Professor Paul Laughlin, is to “convey spiritual truths” that guide our lives – spiritual truths, which he says, “are more profound than factual truth or truthful facts.”

### **3) The doctrinal dimension**

Thirdly, there is what Ninian Smart calls the “doctrinal dimension” of religion, which has to do with an attempt to give intellectual clarity and system to one’s religious faith, something Unitarian Universalists spend a good bit of time on, even though ours is not a creedal faith.

### **4) The ethical dimension**

Fourthly, there is the “ethical dimension” of religion. This has to do with the code of ethics that religions propound, the question of how to live practically and concretely in this world: how to be a neighbor to other humans, how to relate to the non-human world and the earth itself. Certainly, ours is a religious approach in which questions of how we should live concretely in *this* world are at the very core of our faith.

### **5) The social dimension**

Fifthly, there is the “social dimension” of religion, which has to do with the social and communal shape of our lives. This is an increasingly important function of religion in our time because of the scatter and mobility of our lives. A religious institution, thus, helps to provide a social center: an opportunity for people to come together in social communion; to get to know each other at some depth; to raise their families together; to care for each other in need; to celebrate occasions of joy, sorrow, and times of passage; and simply to take pleasure in the company of fellow humans.

## 6) The experiential dimension

Sixthly and finally, there is what Ninian Smart calls the “experiential dimension” of religion, which is the most personal and individual aspect of religion. It’s the dimension in which the individual is called to awaken to a sense of wonder and participation within this mysterious reality in which we find ourselves. Ultimately, organized religion is organized to assist humans in discovering how they are part of the whole of things, how they may commune and connect with the larger reality that transcends themselves, how they can touch the magic at the heart of the universe.

These, then, comprise the six dimensions of organized religion, as Ninian Smart has delineated them: the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, and experiential dimensions. They are the ground and substance of religious institutions in general, the broader context of all organized religion.

### Liberal religion

Moving, now, to liberal religion, what does it mean to be a “liberal” in religion, and what is a *liberal* religious organization about and for? What does it offer us and the world?

Often, when we are asked to talk about Unitarian Universalism and the beliefs of our liberal faith, we end up saying something like:

“Well, here we are free, and here we can believe whatever we want.” Or, again: “Here we are free, and here we don’t have any beliefs.”

This doesn’t quite cut it for me, nor do I think it is true.

So, what are the commonly-held beliefs of liberal religion? What is the identity of Unitarian Universalism beyond the principle of freedom and embracing diversity, important as these principles are?

In my sermon with you last February, I mentioned a number of different statements from different sources, authors, and studies that attempt to enumerate our commonly-held beliefs. And I gave you a list of my own, which I thought I would repeat today in case some of you weren’t here or in case some of you, unbelievably, might have forgotten one or two of them. Here are some of the basic beliefs that I think most Unitarian Universalists hold in common. They are largely related to having what I would call, a “modern or post-modern world view”:

- A belief that this universe is both ancient and vast; and that our earth, likewise, is very old, having been formed out of the stardust elements of the larger universe.
- A belief that we humans, along with the other forms of life and being, have evolved out of this earth and are part of it; we belong to it, and should respect it and treat it with care.

- A belief that life on *this* earth is what we should attend to first of all, not a future life in another realm – “one life at a time,” as the saying goes – and that we should receive our life with gratitude, and live it by the ethic of love.
- A belief that religion is a *human* enterprise that engages the perennial human questions, such as: Who am I? What is good? How should I live? What should I value?
- A belief that no particular religion has the inside track or trump card or is the one true and final faith; nor is there is a special or secret revelation granted to the few; but, rather, truth is open and available for all.
- A belief that there is no chosen people, but that all peoples and cultures are on an equal footing with one another.
- A belief that there is no special priesthood, but that all individuals have equal access and are *directly* related to the powers that be ... so that authority in religion ultimately rests with the individual and not with an exterior authority, such as pope, preacher, council, creed, or sacred text.
- A belief that reason and science are valuable tools for seeking knowledge, and ought not to be set in opposition to faith.
- And, finally, a belief that deed is more important than creed, that right relations are more important than right beliefs, and that we should strive, ever and always, to treat others with kindness.

These beliefs, I find, are some of the commonly-held beliefs within liberal religion and Unitarian Universalism. They unify us and make us one.

### **The plurality within liberal religion – four faiths**

But we also have a great plurality and diversity within this overall unity. Again, last year in that February sermon, I spoke of these plural perspectives as being basically four in number: humanism, naturalism, mysticism, and theism. I don't have time to go into them today, but I name them here as a way of identifying the plurality and diversity that exists within the larger unity of the common beliefs that I just spoke of.

### **Who is the audience for liberal religion?**

What I have tried to quickly bring you this afternoon, as you embark on a new venture, is a sense of what organized religion in general is, and what our liberal, Unitarian Universalist religion is, and what needs it meets, and, therefore, what it can mean for our lives.

But not only for our lives, but also for the lives of many others in our modern world, because when I think of who the audience is for our liberal religious approach, I think of those who already share our general world-and-life view but who have no religious home, those who have not yet discovered new possibilities in organized religion. My appeal, therefore, is to the following persons:

- To those who want to be part of a community that is intentional in dealing with the large questions of life within the context of modern thought and belief, who want to integrate the latest in modern thought and understanding with the ancient, ongoing perennial human questions that religion has always dealt with.
- My appeal is those persons who have left the religious traditions of their youth, traditions that may have worked well for them in their childhood, but haven't worked as well in their adulthood, and who now seek an expansion and an evolution of what they once loved.
- My appeal is to those who have felt unworthy in the religious tradition in which they were raised and now seek an affirmation of their worth as human beings, as well as an assurance that they are, indeed, religious and spiritual beings after all, just not in the way that they might have previously been taught or come to believe.
- My appeal is to those who were raised without any particular religious affiliation, but who seek something more than what secular culture offers, who desire a community that can help deepen their lives, who want a place to nourish a life of the spirit; a place to pierce below the surface of things to the ground of things; a place to seek and find a vertical center to life in the midst of the scatter and distraction of an overly-busy life and of an increasingly flat and horizontal world.
- My appeal is to those who seek community, companionship, and friendship; a place to raise their children; a place to pay attention to and to celebrate the passages of a life.
- And, finally, my appeal is those who desire not just personal centering, but who want to be part of a group where they can contribute to the welfare of the larger community and even of the world, a community that is interested in social justice and ecological and environmental concerns.

Our liberal religion could mean so much to so many in so many ways, and I hope it does to you who are here today as you embark on this new venture and adventure. So may it be.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Peninsula Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on June 10, 2012.)