

"Spiritual But Not Religious"  
by Rev. Meghan Cefalu  
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A few weeks ago a childhood friend of mine, Craig, and I were getting reacquainted over tea and cookies at a little cafe in our hometown. As often happens when people learn that I am a minister, the conversation turned to religion. He told me, a little bit defensively, that he is not at all religious. But then he went on to assure me that he considers himself is a deeply spiritual man. Even though I had a feeling that I knew already, I asked him to tell me more about what he meant by that distinction.

He said spirituality is personal. Spirituality is his feeling of a connection to something that transcends him. While he doesn't believe in God in any traditional understanding, he does have a sense of some essential Oneness from which all things are derived. Whereas religion is organized and institutional.

He said, "Religions are narrowly defined boxes of prescribed, and terribly outdated, beliefs. I've done a lot of searching," he explained, "and what I've realized is that there is not a single religion that is broad enough to encompass all that I have come to believe is spiritually true."

I told him that my favorite Sufi poet, Hafiz, points to the heart of my mystical understanding of spirituality when he says, "Everything is sacred." In other words, spiritual practice is whatever we do here and now with the intention of moving closer to what is most true and alive for us.

He gave me a rundown of all the things he does that would qualify as spiritual practice by this definition. He goes to a yoga class twice a week, a Buddhist meditation on some Friday nights, he takes week-long solo backpack trips in the Sierras a couple of times a year, volunteers as a math tutor with an inner-city school, is inspired by a book of Taoist teachings he reads frequently and he also enjoys accompanying his parents to the Presbyterian church of his childhood on visits back home. He said each of these things, in their own way, help him to feel alive, and grounded and connected to something beyond himself. But it takes a combination of all of these things to fill all his needs.

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The way Craig describes himself spiritually sounds an awful lot like a Unitarian Universalist doesn't it?

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I laughed and told him that the pews and chairs of our roughly 1000 UU congregations all over the country were filled with people with spiritual stories just like his. I explained that, like myself, many Unitarian Universalists are refugees from another religion. Of course, there are some we call "lifers" who were raised in the tradition. And some people come to us "unchurched". That is to say this is their first experience with a religious organization.

He jumped at those last words, "You called it a 'religious organization'". He said, "but you said earlier that you do not have the same beliefs. So do you consider Unitarian Universalism a religion?"

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With that question he tapped into one of the most hotly debated topics among Unitarian Universalists. Are we technically a religion?

As UUs we represent a variety of beliefs and spiritual practices, some of which we may observe "religiously", but I would venture a guess that most of us would not call ourselves "religious" people. I know that there are people here who do not even consider themselves "spiritual". Yet, here we all are this morning worshiping together. (And by "worship" I always intend the original sense of the word that is to "give shape to and honor that which is of greatest worth.") Many of us here feel we "belong" to this liberal religious Community and it belongs to us. But do we consider Unitarian Universalism a religion?

The word "religion" is from the Latin religare meaning, "to bind back or together," It shares the same root as the word "ligament" those tough, flexible fibers that hold our bones together. Because in the last hundred years Unitarian Universalism has evolved away from its Christian roots to more widely encompass various theologies as well as a-theologies, we are religious – held together – only in the sense of our shared values, not our shared beliefs.

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To begin to answer Craig's question, I told him what I knew of Karen Armstrong's research into the history and universality of religion. That it is humanity's attempts to understand the great mysteries. It is our response to the dual reality of being born and having to die. There has always been religion – as long as people have been around.

"Sure", he said in response, "but it seems religion today is about rules and dogma and forcing people to at least say they believe in preposterous things under threat of eternal punishment. Not so much about pondering the great mysteries of life together. And what do you say about the enormous amount of violence that has been – and continues to be – perpetrated upon innocent people in the name of God?"

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What he says is true. And it is held up by a lot of people as proof that religions are all bad and completely unredeemable. But I think it is important to make the distinction that that is what happens to religions when people move away from any actual sense of true spirituality. It has happened over and over through out time in various traditions: some corrupt scoundrels make a power grab over the rest of the people by distorting the message, or withholding information, or twisting the meaning so that the masses will, usually under some sort of threat, do as the religious leaders instruct.

People begin to take authority as the truth rather than truth as the authority.

The same thing happens in government systems too, it is amplified when leaders somehow manage to intertwine religious power and political power.

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"Just to clarify, in Unitarian Universalism, we do not place ultimate authority in any one set of scriptures, nor in the clergy, or even in our denominational leadership. We have no creed, and no dogma."

I explained that "We democratically agree upon our Principles and Purposes and that in them we collectively affirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We draw inspiration from various religious texts as well as the discoveries of science and the words of poets – but each of us only claims as Truth the ideas that make it through the filter of our individual reason and experience."

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Let me pause here in the telling of this story to share three quotes I found that represent various perspectives on religion, all of which I think are true.

On one end of the spectrum we have the Hindu teacher, Ramakrishna who said, "God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole."

But even back as far as the fourth century philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria warned of accepting with blind faith the teachings of any religion. He said, in no uncertain terms, "All formal dogmatic religions are fallacious and must never be accepted by self-respecting persons as final."

Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum we have D.H. Lawrence musing on the fact that our relationship to our religious beliefs or spiritual understandings must always be in process. In a letter to his priest he wrote: "A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification."

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To my explanation Craig said, "Wow. That sounds good and it actually makes a lot of sense. But I still think that regular attendance or involvement in a religious community is not really that important for spiritual growth."

To which I replied, "Sure, it is just like the fact that a person can be well-educated without ever stepping foot on a school campus. But I also think there is something incomparable about being a part of an historically rooted tradition and committing to a regular, transforming, shared spiritual experience – especially with people you would not necessarily pick to be your friends. The dedication it takes to stay at the table with one another - being accountable to one another, forgiving and asking forgiveness from one another, and encouraging one another to take risks and grow spiritually, to me that is the heart and soul of organized religion."

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He said, "So let me see if I understand what you're saying... A person can be spiritual all by themselves. But religion, when it is done right, provides the structure and organization

within which spirituality can be nurtured along, and that church involvement is about deepening what would otherwise be a solitary experience. "

"That's about right." I said.

He considered our conversation for a few moments. Then he said, "As interesting as it sounds, I still think that Unitarian Universalism does not have enough structure to honestly be called a religion. You do not have beliefs in common, no mandatory requirements, no creeds, no worship of a higher power. To me those are the things that define a religion."

"You know, we can disagree about that." I said, "Even longstanding UUs do not agree with one another about that point."

And with that we hugged our goodbyes and left the cafe.

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Since that conversation with my friend I've had some further thoughts about whether Unitarian Universalism is a religion.

We share in common with other religions that our members come to the same place at the same time each week, whether it is called a "church", a "fellowship", or a "community". We gather to worship – to give shape to and honor what is of greatest worth. And we come to get in touch with that which transcends us - be it "God" or "the Universe" or simply this larger community of caring people.

And just like every religion, Unitarian Universalism has the potential for a wide variety of experience. Some people come because in this intentional gathering they are more able to touch those places of deep truth within their heart. For some the continuity of ritual in each week's service helps to ground them. Some come to receive the gift of human touch – Sunday's hugs will have to last until next week. Heck, some people come just to have coffee and cookies with their friends. Each person has a wide range of reasons for attending any religious service. And I think this is true in every church or temple or mosque or synagogue in every religion.

I realize that whether or not we describe Unitarian Universalism as a collection of diverse spiritualities or as a religion probably does not matter very much in the grand scheme of things. But how you think of this place, how you understand your relationship to these people seated around you and what you are all doing here does matter.

What are we doing here? Why do we come? What is so exciting about what happens here that we are overflowing this room most weeks? What do you receive from your engagement with this religious organization?

It seems to me that we come together to share what is most true and alive for us:

We light candles and tell one another of our greatest joys and fears that are shaking our very foundations.

We sing songs that express in melody and verse our highest hopes and strivings.

We welcome new babies and we grieve the sickness and death of those we love.

We listen to inspirational words that ask us each week to reexamine for ourselves what we know to be true.

And ideally we are moved to act in the world as more loving, generous and compassionate people.

No matter what brought you here today, whether or not to you Unitarian Universalism is a true religion, let this place, and these other people, provide you with a spiritual home.

Welcome home.

Amen.