

APRIL 17, 2016

Sunday Sermon: “Why Religion Matters”

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Red text was not spoken during the Sunday sermon.

One theme common to all religion is AWE. Religion has been filled with experiences of Awe or the numinous: from the vision quest of native Americans, Moses experience of the burning bush, Paul’s blindness on the road to Emmaus, John Smith’s experience of the angel Mordici to Mohammad’s experience writing the Quran.

In 2012 an obscure, amateurish video produced by a naturalized Egyptian Copt with insulting portrayals of the Prophet appeared on the internet over 1 million Muslims were taken to streets in over two dozen cities world-wide. Millions of dollars of damage and dozens of people have been killed. A Pakistani official, risking prison, offered \$100,000 bounty on the producer. While it can be argued that this event is not totally about religion. Someone thinks religion matters.

Repeatedly responding to an internet rumor about President Obama, that he attempts to remove “In God We Trust” from our coins and bills. This rumor has been erupting since 2010. Clearly someone believes religion matters.

In February 2006, Mike Thompson of Ohio claimed to have found the image of Jesus on his breakfast pancake and immediately listed it for sale on Ebay. His listing got nationwide media coverage and reached a high bid of just under \$15,000. Clearly someone believes religion matters.

But the most recent sighting of the Virgin Mary is on a grilled cheese sandwich and was found in Florida. The finder claims to have kept the sandwich for over 10 years, during which time she had extreme luck at the casinos and it was mold-free for those ten years and is considered by some to display a miraculous nature. The partially eaten sandwich subsequently sold on E-bay to the Golden Palace Casino for \$28,000. Its image is in the Order of Worship. Now I think the image looks more like Susan Sarandon than Mary but then Mary’s latest photos don’t do her justice. As an economic return this religious icon is probably better than Apple stock. Someone thinks religion matters.

Carl Jung maintained that a person's psyche will allow them to see that which originates in their unconscious. This he said was the origin of flying saucers. This causes people see the face of Jesus in clouds and nebula and monsters in Loch Ness, and Canals on Mars. Many see and experience what they greatly yearn to see and experience. One way to explain these phenomena is with the term miracle. This becomes a loaded term to many of us whose lives are lived in worlds of rationalism and science. Yet there are real miracles in human existence; the mystery of the Red Knot, the capacity to love despite decades of despair or just the experience of hope even in a hopeless situation.

Ramadan this year is in June and Yom Kippur, the high holiday of the Jewish calendar, was in September. For both these great religions these are times of reflection and spiritual discipline expressing the gratitude of the believer for God's guidance and atoning for past sins, confession, repentance, and prayers for forgiveness of sins committed during the year.

For these two great faiths, representing 1.6 billion and 13 million believers respectively, religion matters. Since 11 September 2001 there has been a resurgence of all religious expressions. On September 11th the picture of the smoke coming off the second tower after the second collision appeared to many to be the image of the devil. They saw the face of the devil. Like the toasted cheese sandwich I talked of early, people see what they yearn to see, or possibly see what is programmed in our genes to perceive.

In some way the yearning is an important part of our humanness, our striving to be human. Maybe it is the myth of the great parent, like the story of Pinocchio. A childless puppet maker creates a life-like wooden puppet that comes to life as the result of the old man's wish. Not content with being an artificial boy, he goes on a quest to become real. Its retelling is part of our movie legacy with movies like A.I. Artificial Intelligence whose main character is a young boy robot who longs to be human and therefore to be loved. This yearning to relate with something greater than ourselves may well be part of our humanness. It may be why, despite all facts to the contrary, religion matters.

Religion as Victoria pointed out in our meditation comes from the Latin meaning to bind. We come to formalized religion for two reasons: the need for intimate contact and the quest to examine ultimate questions. Russell's statement in the responsive reading about "encouragement, with sympathy," and "fellow-suffers in

the same darkness” express intimacy and ultimacy. Russell was a self-proclaimed atheist. In other words, to put a mantra on it; religion is for intimacy and ultimacy. We are, all humans who are born, strive for love and ultimately die. Now there is an old proverb that states two things all people can’t avoid are death and taxes, but we now know from the 2012 presidential campaign that 47 percent of us are freeloaders and avoid the latter. So maybe there is only one thing we can’t avoid and that is death. This one ultimacy we have in common with every sentient creature from the start of time and every religion since humanoids emerged from primordial caves has had some thought or theory for this ultimacy.

Looking back to September fifteen years ago, after the 9/11 tragedy, ONE OUT OF FOUR adult Americans on the Internet, roughly 28 million at that time sought out religious or spiritual information online. Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, one out of four American Internet users sought information on Islam, and 41 percent said they sent or received e-mail prayer requests. This planet now contains about 6 billion people whom an estimate of 90 some percent believes in a religion or something greater than themselves. It would be extremely narcissistic of anyone or small group to write-off that many people as irrelevant. That number I would say would at least need to be held with validity if only to understand why they feel they had to believe. Arguably, there is no real consensus on what humanity believes, but as phenomena, belief is real and valid and should not be ignored.

As I pointed out on the radio last week John Dominic Crosson, a distinguished professor of Theology at DePaul University, author of many books about Jesus, a former member of a Catholic religious community and founding member of the Jesus Seminar has said that the function of most organized religion since ancient times has been to provide community and work for justice. Or put in my mantra for issues of intimacy and ultimacy. If this is the phenomena of religion, what is there not to believe? Let me say that again. Here is an internationally known Catholic theologian who says that religion from the dawn of humanity is here for community and the creation of Justice. But what is equally as important is what he did not say. He did not talk about an afterlife or a revering of a divine personage, but about how we humans create a community, and why.

You are not here because of faces on cheese sandwiches, or because someone produced an insulting video about Unitarian Universalism or to find that perfect answer to those unanswerable questions. You are here as a religion to provide

community and work for justice. If this is the function of religion, then religion in this Universalist Church does matter.

I believe the history of humankind can be divided into three periods. The earliest is the pre-modern or traditional era up to the rise of modern science. During these eras humankind used myth and story to trace our development. Life depended on right relationships. Humans maintained relationship with their world through a certain respect for the established way of life, using biblical stories or myth to shape life decisions. It was a less material based lifestyle. The religious ideas from this traditional period were comforting but very simplistic. Many of you have probably rejected the religious images from the traditional era. I think rightly so.

In the modern period, we humans looked to technology to define more of our authority and our lifestyle. Material gains and benefits have increased during this period. The modern period lasts up to the first half or three quarters of the 20th century. From this point we entered the post-modern. With the inauguration of the scientific and modern worldview, human beings find themselves the bearers of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything. The use of knowledge gained by modern thought is to put humanity first. In doing so I believe we only see part of the picture. A demon of the modern era is materialism and a consumerist culture that encourages us to shop our way to enlightenment, and even on earth day to put our needs before the needs of our planet. To illustrate, if you pull all your shades down to half way as on the windows in this sanctuary you can see the ground very nicely. You can concentrate on studying those objects that sit on our lawn, but you miss seeing what is the upper part of the window, the beautiful clouds or sky.

While modernity gives humanity the scientific method and a more complete knowledge of the natural world; post-modernity offers humankind the tools for addressing social injustices of every kind. Modernity's gift of knowledge and technology's capability to affect our physical world does nothing to increase our wisdom of how to act in it. This I believe comes with our post-modern era and post-modern thinking. Modernity's model was one of deconstruction, looking at the physical world through various types of microscopes. It occurs in all fields of study from biblical studies to biology to economics. In modernity we examine our world to see how it is assembled, how it ticks, how it has evolved. Then we use this knowledge to construct devices that make our aims as a people easier to achieve. The post-modern era lets us look at those devices more holistically: macro vs. micro.

If we have the capability to build or scientifically accomplish some feat does not obligate humankind to proceed on that path. This is the challenge and the gift of

the post-modern era. How do we restrain our capabilities for the sake of higher human aims?

If the purpose of religion is just what Crosson said “to provide community and work for justice,” then religion may well be at odds with the juggernaut of modernity. For example, we have the tools via modern warfare to destroy individuals whom we deem enemies as with our drone program, but are less accomplished in understanding how to create world community with our adversaries. This is the challenge of post modernity and I think religion. I don't think the dialogue between modern and post-modern thinking is between science and humanities. That is too simplistic. There are many in science who take a wider view of the discipline, as there are also many in humanities that are fundamental in their thinking.

When I was doing my internship in 1995, the congregation had a lecture series and invited Huston Smith, an eminent authority on world religions. Over dinner he tells the story of his interaction with the late, great physicist David Bohm. Bohm stated, "I would say that in my scientific and philosophical work, my main concern has been with understanding the nature of reality in general and of consciousness in particular as a coherent whole, which is never static or complete but which is an unending process of movement and unfoldment...."

Bohm was educated at Penn State and Berkeley, where he earned his PhD with Robert Oppenheimer. Bohm took a position as assistant professor at Princeton University in 1947. While teaching quantum theory over the subsequent few years, he wrote a textbook entitled *Quantum Theory* in 1951, which remains to this day a classic in the field. Upon completing this work, Bohm became acquainted with Albert Einstein, who was also at Princeton at the time. His associations with Einstein supported some of Einstein's reservations with Quantum Theory. He was thought of by some as Einstein's intellectual son.

Shortly afterward Bohm was called before the McCarthy committee and refused to appear and subsequently lost his position at Princeton despite Einstein's support. He spent most of the rest of his life working in England.

Smith described his connection with Bohm: “At one point during my decade at Syracuse University the administration entered a line-item in its budget to enable the humanities division to bring to the campus each year for three weeks a distinguished visiting professor of humanities.”

Smith was appointed to chair the search committee, which consisted of one member from each of the division's five departments. Saul Bellow for the English Department was an easy choice, as was Noam Chomsky for the philosophers. Next it was the religion department's turn, and (as its representative) Smith put forward the name of David Bohm. Pandemonium! Smith's colleagues protested: "You know that the administration gave us this sop to salve its conscience for shortchanging the humanities, and you propose that we give the plum to a scientist!"

Smith continues: "When the hubbub died down to the point where I could be heard, I admitted that I was indeed doing that, but that I had my reasons. Bohm's doctrine of the implicate order that transcends space and time housed more important implications for religion than anything any religious studies professor we could think of was saying."

The committee was not mollified, but Smith had voted for their candidates, so they had no choice but to vote his. Likewise, the Physics department was glad to have Bohm too since, as Smith recalled, "Everyone in our department cut his quantum mechanics teeth on Bohm's textbook."

Bohm accepted the invitation, and in due time he arrived for his visit. Smith continues:

"His three-week stay opened with a Monday evening lecture for the general public. The physics department was out in force. The physics colloquium took place two days later. When Bohm and I arrived at the departmental office, the chairman welcomed him and then turned him over to several senior professors in order to draw me into the hall. 'Huston,' he said, 'I want to let you know that he will not have a friendly audience.'" Bohm's Monday address had not been well received by the physicists.

"When it was time to proceed to the colloquium, we found our way blocked by mobs of faculty and students in the corridors. A backup was in place, and word was circulated that we would proceed to room such-and-such. It too proved inadequate, and what was to have been a colloquium ended as a lecture in the largest hall in the physics building. Even so, some students had to stand throughout the event.

Once introduced, David Bohm mounted the large stage and (without glancing at a note the entire time) talked nonstop for an hour and a quarter as he paced back and forth, covering the three-section, three-tier blackboard with incomprehensible equations. Glancing around the hall, I suspected that within ten minutes he had lost everyone but a handful of senior professors, but he kept on talking.

And the audience kept on listening, if for no other reason than to remember for the rest of their lives the experience of watching the working of a mind of a man who had worked closely with Einstein and whose Hidden-Variable Theory continued to hold out a (minority) hope that Einstein was right in thinking that God does not play dice (with the Universe). When finally, as abruptly as he had begun, Bohm stopped talking and sat down, the Physics chairman called for questions.

Instantly the arm of a senior professor in the front row shot up. "Professor Bohm," the questioner said, "this is all very interesting philosophy. But what does it have to do with physics?" Smith said, he glanced at the solid bank of equations that stared out at us from the blackboards, with not a single word in sight. Without batting an eye, Bohm replied, 'I do not make that distinction.'

A pall fell over the hall. One or two polite questions brought the afternoon to a close."

For Smith, the science that Bohm saw was a science that saw beyond the confines of cause and effects and peers into the realm of post-modernity. Other modern theologians have been scientists also like Alfred North Whitehead and our own UU Charles Hartshorne who both maintain that just because a thing can't be measured does not mean it has no substance.

As I look back at the last fifty years of the 20th century from the second decade of the 21st century, I see great advances in technology, but just glimpses of equal advances in creating world community and more universal justice. These are issues of Ultimacy. Does Religion Matter? I believe it does. This in my view is why religion matters.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world, Amen.