

Religion for a New America

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A minister colleague of mine tells a story of being invited to preach at the Arlington Street Church in Boston during the summer. It was a hot, muggy day, and the front doors of the church were left open in the vain hope of providing a bit of ventilation. When he walked up to the pulpit and looked out, he found himself staring at the statue of William Ellery Channing across the street in Boston's Public Garden.

He said it was unnerving to preach with Channing staring at you.

Imagine how I feel! Here in Baltimore, Channing isn't across the street. He is in this very sanctuary, looking over my shoulder.

I am delighted and honored to be here on this Union Sunday to help commemorate Channing's historic sermon that helped to launch the Unitarian movement. (And you may take comfort that, unlike Channing, my remarks are much briefer than Channing's 13,105 words.)

Today, in the spirit of that momentous occasion in 1819, I would have us once again reflect on the troubled state of religion in our time. And, in the spirit of Channing, I would have us consider the future of liberal religion.

Before entering the ministry I was a journalist. I was editor and publisher of two community newspapers in Oregon and I served as a Knight International Press Fellow in Peru for five months.

As an old newspaper editor, I can't help but notice that religion has been getting a lot of bad press. The historic conflict between Muslims and Jews continues unabated. Like a pernicious virus, fundamentalism infects the great Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Sunnis and Shiites remain bitter rivals in the Muslim world. We have seen similar violence between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. The ongoing genocide in Darfur has a religious dimension. Religious violence is part of our daily lives. (Think about how easily that phrase, "religious violence," rolls off our tongues! "Religious violence" should be an oxymoron.)

Yet violence is just the beginning of the mess religion is in today. In an era of bursting human population the Catholic Church continues to oppose birth control. A narrow and distorted reading of ancient purity codes in scripture is used to justify the persecution and marginalization of millions of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Hundreds of millions of women in the world are still oppressed by religious dogmas that treat them like property.

Religious zealots have spent a century opposing the teaching of evolution. They are still at it. A new multi-million dollar museum to promote creationism has opened in Kentucky. When I see such ignorant silliness I don't know whether to cry, or scream, or laugh out loud.

The list goes on and on. Religion is a mess today. Horrible things are done in the name of religion. No wonder we are seeing a reaction against all religion. Books like *The End of Faith* and *The God Delusion* are bestsellers and the recent movie "Religulous" ridicules religion.

Have things always been like this? Yes and no. Religious conflict is as old as humanity. Religion has always had a role in giving legitimacy to those in power. Yet, for most people most of the time religion has not been a source of conflict. Let's do a little time travel. Let's imagine ourselves living a thousand years ago, in the year 1009. Most of us would live on a farm or in a small village. Few cities of any size existed. If we lived in a village in England we would probably never meet anyone who was not a Christian. The village church was at the center of social life, a place for seeing neighbors and a place for rights of passage. If we were born in the Arab world, we might never see a human being who was not Muslim. In India, we would only know other Hindus. And there was no conflict between religion and science, for there was no science. No one doubted the myths or the dogma. A thousand years ago the earth was still the center of the universe.

Today we live in a new world. Just look around at the amazing racial and cultural mix in America today. I was in Oakland, California, a few months ago. In Oakland, children enter the school system speaking 70 different languages. I could not find the figure for Baltimore, but I suspect it is in the same ballpark. The majority of children under 10 in America are not white. In another generation the majority of Americans will not be "whites" of European descent.

We live in a new world, a world in which once isolated cultures and religious traditions are in constant contact. *We desperately need new religion for a new world.* The old religions lead to tribalism, violence, suspicion, hatred, and oppression. We need a religion that transcends divisions, religion that unites enemies, religion that points to a new future that includes everyone.

This has happened before. Christianity only became a powerful religious force when the early Christians transcended their roots in a Judaism that was the religion of one ethnic group. If the early Christians had remained a sect of Jewish radicals, they would have dwindled away. We would never have heard of Jesus. But the early Christians came to see their gospel as a message for everyone and spread it everywhere.

A similar thing happened in Islam. The Prophet Mohammed created a powerful religion that transcended all the tribal gods among the Arab peoples. This is the power and the genius of his teaching that there is no God but God. He was preaching that the tribal allegiances to different gods were all false, that we all owe allegiance to the same creator. It was his way of saying we are all one. It was his way of creating a new religion for a new age.

Long before Christianity and Islam, early Judaism helped unite the Hebrew people by helping them to see themselves as having a special covenant with God. The commandment to have no other gods before Yahweh was a way of transcending tribal loyalties.

The tragic irony is that today Judaism, Christianity and Islam, religions that were born by transcending the barriers of tribalism, have become bastions of a new tribalism. Today Judaism, Islam and Christianity, especially the more conservative parts of them, have become what they first opposed: narrow, rigid and reactionary. They look back and seek to recapture a fantasy of the past instead of embracing a vision for the future.

What might a religion for our time look like? What would a religion need to be today to transcend our tribal allegiances, to harness idealism and compassion, to change lives and give life meaning? This is a huge, huge issue. This affects the future of humanity.

I am not the reincarnation of the Prophet Mohammed. I am not Moses or the Apostle Paul. Yet I believe we can see the rough outline of a religion for our time. Let's take a look at what a religion for our time might look like. Here is my rough and preliminary sketch.

First, I do not believe that a religion for our time can ask people to reject the religious traditions they grew up with. We can, however, create a religion that draws wisdom and strength from our religious pasts even while we transcend them. My conservative Christian upbringing taught me to value community, commitment, compassion and justice. That is a precious gift. Yet I must transcend the narrow theology that taught me that everyone who believed differently from us was condemned to hell. I need to be open to the great spiritual gifts of other traditions. A religion for our time must draw upon many religious traditions while transcending them all.

A religion for our time must see science and human learning as a partner, not an enemy. We must move beyond treating myths and poetry as if they were history or science. A religion for our time is open to learning and delights in discovery. This tension between science and religion is madness.

And just as a religion for our time respects humanity's diverse traditions, so too must it respect human diversity. It must begin with the premise that each one of us matters. Women matter. People of all racial backgrounds matter. Poor people matter as much as rich people. Uneducated people matter as much as scholars. People of all sexual orientations matter. Children matter. The aged matter. A religion for our time does not merely tolerate human diversity, it celebrates it.

A religion for our time must be about wholeness, integrity, and engagement. It must promote the spiritual practices that give us depth and insight: meditation, prayer, small groups, and music. It must touch our hearts as well as our heads.

Our new religion must promote deep reflection, but it must never, never, become an escape from life or descend into navel gazing narcissism. A religion for our time must be prophetic. It must speak truth to power. It must raise a powerful voice against violence, injustice, racism, economic exploitation, and the destruction of life on our planet. A religion for our time is not afraid of power. It *uses* power. A religion for our time must strive to transform the world.

Beyond this, our new religion must have a vision of a multiracial and multicultural future. It must invite people to come together in love to help create new world—a world of peace, justice, equity, compassion and stewardship of the environment. It must draw upon ancient and undying human longing for harmony, for beloved community, for bringing the kingdom of God to earth.

Just imagine such a religion! Imagine a religion that affirms the worth and dignity of all people; that seeks justice, equity and compassion; that draws upon the wisdom and insight of many faith traditions; that is open to new learning; that respects human diversity; that promotes peace; that demands good stewardship of our planet.

Wow. Wouldn't that be great.

You would think that such a religion would take the world by storm. This is what millions of people are seeking.

You, of course, are two steps ahead of me. You can see where I am going. I just finished summarizing our seven principles and the sources upon which we draw.

This is us! This is us!

We can be the religion for our time.

Why then, why, are we a microscopic part of religion today?

We should be the religion for our time. We should be embracing and empowering hundreds of thousands—nay, millions—of people who are longing to transcend religious tribalism and to create a new world.

But we're not.

And it simply drives me nuts.

Let me share some grim facts. I hope they drive you nuts, too.

It has been almost fifty years since the Unitarians and the Universalists merged. Today our membership is about the same as it was then: a little more than 150,000 adult members. The population of the country has grown by 68 percent. We are a much smaller part of American religion now than we were then. I find it especially troubling that in New England, where our roots are, our numbers are in decline. More troubling still is the fact that last year, for the first time in a generation, our membership actually went down slightly.

Yet the potential for us is huge!

In the past nine years the congregation I serve in Colorado has been one of the half dozen or so fastest growing churches in our Association. We have almost doubled in size. If the entire movement had grown at the rate of the church I serve, it would have added almost 140,000 members. The movement has grown a little,

but it amounts to about one person per congregation per year. That's right: one person per congregation per year.

When I talk to people joining our congregation they often assume that it is typical, that our liberal religious movement is thriving. They are surprised that this isn't the case.

At a deep level I am surprised also. I know that our congregation is far from perfect. We have the same struggles you have. We mess up all the time. I mess up all the time. (Fortunately we don't have time to go into any details on *that* topic—the length would rival the sermons of Channing.) Yet in the last nine years we transformed our congregation. We serve about 500 more adults and children. Now that we are larger, we can make much more of a difference in the outside world.

And I mean a real difference. A few months ago I got an e-mail that made tears well up in my eyes. It was from Juan de Dios, leader of a small organization of Mayan survivors of massacres in Guatemala 25 years ago. My congregation, Jefferson Unitarian, has sent two delegations to Guatemala with the UU Service Committee. I was part of the first group. Juan's e-mail was an update, with photographs, of 13 impoverished Mayan students, almost all of them girls, we are supporting to get an education beyond fifth grade. Their lives will never be the same because of us. We are involved in so many ways in our community—housing the homeless, in interfaith public witness, in environmental work, and more.

We could not have done this nine years ago. Now that we are bigger we are stronger. And we're making a difference.

I know you all have your own stories of making a difference in people's lives. You have a long history of involvement in your communities. Imagine what you could do if you were two or three times larger.

What do you think is possible, really possible, right here in Baltimore and the surrounding area? You, too, want to touch more lives and make a difference in the world. The challenge for all of us is to turn these dreams into reality. The need for liberal religious community is greater than ever. Just how many potential members are there in this area? How many people are there who are longing for depth, for real community, for an opportunity to make a difference? Imagine doubling in size. Imagine the energy. Imagine the worship, the religious education, the small groups, the pastoral care. Imagine the impact you could have in your communities and beyond with public witness and social action programs. This isn't a wild dream.

This is doable. We need to unleash the idealism, energy and passion that are already here.

After all, we are the spiritual descendants of passionate dreamers and determined builders like Channing, Hosea Ballou, Theodore Parker and Susan B. Anthony. We need to recapture that feisty, optimistic, tireless passion.

Here is the real issue for every one of our congregations—mine and yours and a thousand more. What are we called to be? What are we called to be? If we are faithful to our highest ideals, what is truly possible for this congregation? What is possible for our movement?

These are sobering times—times filled with uncertainty and anxiety. At a time such as this the work of this congregation is needed more than ever. You are called to be a place of healing and support. We are all called to be voices for compassion, voices calling our culture back to a sense of the common good. We must be moral beacons in a dark time—a time in which out of control individual acquisitiveness has wreaked havoc on our economy and on our environment.

What are we called to be?

I believe we are called to transform lives. We are called to be a force for compassion, understanding, sustainability and peace.

We are called to feed the spiritually hungry and open our home to the religiously homeless. We are called to heal and empower people so that they can in turn help transform our world. We are called to teach our children compassion, understanding and respect.

We live in dark times, times filled with hatred, injustice, prejudice, ignorance. Sadly, obsolete religions created for another time contribute to the darkness.

We can be the religion for our time. We can lead. We can help transcend the religious tribalism that is killing people every day. This is why I am running for the presidency of our Association.

You and I are called to shine the light of compassion, the light of openness, the light of acceptance, the light of justice, the light of truth.

We can do this. We must do it.

If we let the love in our hearts and our ideals of freedom and justice guide us, we can revitalize our faith, we can touch lives, we can change the world.

We live in a new America—and we have a religion that is perfect, *perfect*, for this new America.

Let's let our light shine. Let it shine with new brilliance right here in Baltimore and all across our land.

Shine on! Amen.