

“Dimensions of Religion: The Ethical Dimension”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
October 1, 2006
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

This day is a new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together,
Giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

My heart is moved by all I cannot save;
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
With no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.
(Adrienne Rich)

Responsive Reading

Our short responsive reading this morning is from Saadi, an Islamic poet of the 12th and 13th century.

MINISTER: To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.

CONGREGATION: It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes.

MINISTER: All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence.

CONGREGATION: If fate brings suffering to one member

ALL: The others cannot stay at rest.

(Saadi, Persian Sufi poet, 1184-1283)

Introduction to Reading

I am in the middle of a six-part sermon series on the nature of religion and religious community. I'm approaching this subject through a framework suggested by English scholar of world religions, Ninian Smart, who identified six different dimensions of

religion: the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, and experiential dimensions. Today I will be speaking on the ethical dimension.

Our religious nature, I have been saying, is spoken in of both narrower and broader ways. The narrower or more restrictive way is to speak of our religious nature in relation to an organized religion and its rituals, myths, beliefs, and practices. The broader way is to speak of our religious nature as being related to what is of greatest importance in one's life, whether or not it is connected to a given organized religion.

My reading this morning is from a remarkable individual, Tenzin Gyatso, better known as our current Dalai Lama, the XIVth Dalai Lama.

There are two things I would have you note about this reading in relation to my sermon this morning. First, in this reading the Dalai Lama identifies the ethical dimension of religion as being at the heart of religion. Secondly, he speaks of the commonality of ethical teaching found among the major religions of the world. The Dalai Lama writes:

Reading

Kindness is my true religion. No matter whether you are learned or not, whether you believe in the next life or not, whether you believe in God or Buddha or some other religion or not, in day-to-day life you must be a kind person. When you are motivated by kindness, it doesn't matter whether you are a lawyer, a politician, an administrator, a worker, or an engineer: whatever your profession or field, deep down you are a kind person.

Love, compassion, and tolerance are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive. If you have a particular faith or religion, that is good. But you can survive without it if you have love, compassion, and tolerance. Deep down we must have real affection for each other, a clear realization or recognition of our shared human status.

At the same time, we must openly accept all ideologies and systems as a means of solving humanity's problems. One country, one nation, one ideology, one system, is not sufficient. It is helpful to have a variety of different approaches on the basis of the deep feeling of the basic sameness of humanity; we can then make a joint effort to solve the problems of the whole of humankind.

Every major religion has similar ideas of love, the same goal of benefiting humanity through spiritual practice, and the same effect of making its followers into better human beings. All religions teach moral precepts for perfecting the functions of mind, body, and speech. All teach us not to lie or steal or take others' lives. All religions can learn from one another; their ultimate goal is to produce better human beings who will be more tolerant, more compassionate, and less selfish.

(Tenzin Gyatso, The XIVth Dalai Lama)

“DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION: THE ETHICAL DIMENSION”

Defining religion and what it means to be religious

As I said a couple of minutes ago in introducing my reading this morning, in these past several weeks I have been speaking about narrower and broader understandings of what it means to be religious.

The narrower or more restrictive understanding is that one is religious by being connected in some way to an organized religion. In this understanding, it is possible to be non-religious.

In the broader understanding, however, one cannot be non-religious. Rather, in this understanding, we are *all* religious beings because *as a species* we are compelled to find our place in this vast cosmos and to figure out how we should live and what we should serve. To be religious in this more expansive understanding has to do, then, with one's highest loyalties, ultimate allegiances, and deepest values.

Last week I also said that a number of people want to distance themselves from the notion of being “religious.” Increasingly, I hear people refer to themselves as “spiritual beings” or “ethical beings,” but not “religious beings” – “I’m spiritual, not religious; I’m ethical, not religious.” I assume people say this because “religious” for them is associated with aspects of organized religion they want nothing to do with.

But I don't want to lose the word “religious” in its broader meaning, particularly not to the various fundamentalisms of our world. “Religious,” as it has traditionally been used, is larger than “spiritual” or “ethical,” and encompasses them. Our “religious nature” has to do with the whole of our being – body, soul, mind, and spirit – and with how our whole being is related to the whole of being. And religion, then, organized religion, is supposed to assist us in our wholeness in orienting ourselves to the whole of life and being.

Particularly when we come to the ethical dimension of religion, it becomes clear that religion and our religious being is something more than whether or not one is connected to a given religious organization.

That's because the ethical dimension of religion has to do with how you shall live this life, how you shall conduct yourself in this life, not only with respect to your own religious community, but with respect to your neighbor, the larger society, and to the earth itself in all life forms and manifestations of being.

And even if your particular religion teaches that this life is primarily a test and a preparation for a future life in another realm, still such religions will provide instruction for how you are to live in this present incarnation, upon this earth, and with your fellow humans and other creatures.

Thus, clearly, one's religious being is more than whether or not one is part of some organized religion.

The ethical dimension related to social and political realms

It's in the ethical dimension of religion that we also see that our religious being cannot ultimately be separated from the social and political realms of our life.

One can, and I think should, separate the institutions of religion and government, of church and state. I believe in the value and importance of this principle. And I am happy to be a citizen of a country that has this principle of the separation of the institutions of religion and government as a foundational principle. (Currently, of course, there is much concern and debate about whether this foundational principle is being adequately attended to – but that's a subject for another time.)

In following this foundational principle that separates the institutions of religion and government, the government is not to establish, or favor, or prohibit, or in any way be prejudiced toward given religious organizations. It may have to referee between them, but it is not to favor one over others.

Additionally, following this principle, the government is to be even-handed with respect to all individuals without regard to whether they belong to a particular religious organization or to none at all.

Thus, I fully believe in the value and importance of the separation of the institutions of religion and government.

But this doesn't mean that you can separate your religious nature from the social and political realms. You can separate the institutions of religion and government, but how can you separate your religious being – your orientation to life as a whole, your highest values and ultimate allegiances, what is central to your life – how can you separate this from public life?

This is also to say that the code of ethics and conduct the various religions teach will and should affect the lives of those individuals who are part of religious institutions. The code of conduct of a religion will and should affect how the individuals in that religion live in the social and political realms. As Gandhi says, "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is."

Thus, particularly in the ethical dimension of religion, we see that religion cannot be a "one-day-a-week" concern. Religion has to do with one's world- and life-view and with living in the world from that world- and life-view.

The ethical dimension of religion

And so when we speak of the ethical dimension of religion as it has appeared throughout time and place, we are talking about the code of ethics and the ethical standards and ideals by which we live, both personal ethics and social ethics.

How should we actually and practically live in the world? Put aside the ritual, mythological, and doctrinal dimensions of religion – how should we live in the day-to-day?

This is what the ethical dimension of religion is about, and organized religion historically, of course, has had much to say about this, and rightly so, for, again, religion has to do with trying to figure out who we are and how we should live.

Now where there is no separation of the institutions of religion and government, as is still the case in many parts of our world, the code of ethics of the religion is the code of ethics of the society. The technical term for this is “sacral society,” a society in which the religion and the culture coincide, or largely coincide; one in which there is a “state religion;” one in which the government is a defender of a “public faith.”

In contrast to this, there is “secular society” in which there is a separation of the institutions of state and organized religion. In my opinion, and as we have generally practiced it in our country, secular society is at its best when it is open to organized religion, affirming not only the freedom of organized religion in society but also the potential value of organized religion for society.

Religious institutions are probably the primary institutions in a society – or at least in ours – in which personal and social ethics and moral values are conserved, explored, and passed on. In this way a secular society, to a significant degree, depends on its religious institutions to provide it with citizens who are able to behave decently in society, to conduct themselves in the society in moral and ethical ways.

Commonality of ethical teaching among the world’s religions

Fortunately, when it comes to the ethical dimension of religion, there is much more unanimity of understanding and approach than there is with respect to the other dimensions of religion.

The ritual, mythological, doctrinal, and social dimensions of organized religion vary enormously between the religions. And the reasons given in the various religions as to why the adherents should conduct themselves in particular ways will vary greatly. But with respect to the primary ethical teachings of religions, there is remarkable unanimity and similarity, as indicated by the Dalai Lama in my earlier reading.

You will find comparable prohibitions among the religions, such as these basics from the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew scripture:

Thou shalt not murder.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.
Thou shalt not steal.
Thou shalt not lie.
Thou shalt not covet what is not yours.

Additionally, religions typically put before their members positive ideals of conduct and spiritual development, common themes of:

love and compassion,
selflessness and charity,
peaceableness and inwardness,
respect for family and community,
concern with the life of the spirit as opposed to a materialistic philosophy of life.

And there is found throughout virtually all religions a basic moral principal of how one is to treat others, namely, “to treat others as you would like to be treated.”

You’ve probably seen or heard different versions of the Golden Rule before, but let me give you a few statements of this basic moral principle, which is the essential basis for the modern concept of human rights. Here are some expressions, given in chronological order, of the Golden Rule from the various religions and their teachers and philosophers:

- From Moses and Judaism: “You must love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18)
- From Zoroastrianism: “That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.” (*Dadistan-I-Dinik*, 94:5)
- From Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” (*Udana-Varga*, 5:18)
- From Taoism and Lao Tzu: “The Sage...makes the self of the people his self.” (*Tao Te Ching*, chapter 49)
- From Confucianism and Confucius: “One word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life [is] reciprocity. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.” (*Doctrine of the Mean*, 13.3)
- From Hinduism: “This is the sum of duty: Do nothing unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.” (*Mahabharata*, 5:1517)
- From Rabbi Hillel and Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary.” (Hillel the Elder, *Talmud*, Shabbat 31a)

- From Jesus and Christianity: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12, NIV)
- From Seneca and the Romans: “Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your superiors.” (Seneca the Younger, Epistulae morales ad Lucilium, 47:11)
- From Muhammad and Islam: “Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you.” (Farewell Sermon)
- From the Marquis de Sade in the 18th century: “All human morality is contained in these words: make others as happy as you yourself would be, and never serve them more ill than you would yourself be served.” (Marquis de Sade, Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man)
- From Baha’ullah and the Bahai faith: “He should not wish for others what he does not wish for himself.” (Baha’u’llah, Lotab-I-Aqdas, 148.73)
- From the British Humanist Association in 1999: “Don’t do things you wouldn’t want to have done to you.”

And a couple of twists on the Golden Rule from two British writers:

- From George Bernard Shaw: “Do *not* do unto others as you would have them do unto you; they may not have the same tastes.”
- And, finally, from Oscar Wilde: “Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.”

These latter two are inversions of the traditional Golden Rule, but like the others, they are still trying to get at the heart of a respect for the identity and dignity of others.

The ethical dimension in liberal religion and Unitarian Universalist congregations

Turning now to the ethical dimension of religion in liberal religion and Unitarian Universalist congregations: Last week I mentioned that many people come to liberal religion because of its principles of free inquiry and right of conscience that are related to the doctrinal dimension of religion. But through its history the real content of liberal religion has been largely related to the ethical dimension of religion.

Many religious liberals have not wanted to have all that much to do with the ritual, mythological, or doctrinal dimensions of religion.

Like Thomas Jefferson, who created his own New Testament by snipping out the miracle stories and other parts he didn't care for and retaining its ethical teachings; so, too, many religious liberals are most concerned about the ethics of religion.

Religion for religious liberals tends to be about good works, not faith; about correct action, not correct belief.

The following words on the theme of faith and good works from the epistle of James in the New Testament scripture get at the heart of liberal religion:

Take the case, my brothers, of someone who has never done a single good act but claims that he has faith. Will that faith save him? If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, "I wish you well: keep yourself warm and eat plenty," without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead.

(James 2:14-16, The Jerusalem Bible)

In liberal religion the mark of a truly religious person – a person who is living up to the ideals of his or her religion – is one who lives an ethical life, both in matters of personal integrity and in relation to an ethic of compassion toward others.

In the final sermon of Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew, there is an often quoted passage of the final judgment and who it is that has done the will of God. In this passage the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Ruler-King, who represents the will of God, stands as Judge in the Day of Judgment, separating those who have done the will of God from those who have not. And the measure of judgment is an ethical one, not a doctrinal one. Interestingly, in this passage, those who are judged virtuous do not even know they have acted virtuously.

Then the King [the Messiah] will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me."

Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?"

And the King will answer, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me."

(Matthew 25: 34-40, The Jerusalem Bible)

The prophetic element in liberal religion

In liberal religion the prophetic element is very important – a crying out against what is perceived as empty ritual, superstitious myth, and dead doctrine. Thus, religious liberals in our heritage are fond of quoting Hebrew prophets like Amos and Micah.

The prophet Amos, for example, rails out against formalism in religion, hearing Yahweh, his God, speaking these words:

I hate and despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies....

Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Amos 5: 21,23-24, Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version)

Likewise, the prophet Micah, in one of the most often quoted passages from the Hebrew scripture, asks and answers the question of how to serve God and speaks plainly about what he regards as the heart of true religion:

“With what gift shall I come into Yahweh’s presence and bow down before God on high?

Shall I come with holocausts [whole-burnt offerings],
with calves one year old?

Will he be pleased with rams by the thousand,
with libations of oil in torrents?

Must I give my first-born for what I have done wrong,
the fruit of my body for my own sin?”

– What is good has been explained to you, man;
this is what Yahweh asks of you:
only this, to act justly,
to love tenderly,
and to walk humbly with your God.

(Micah 6:6-8, The Jerusalem Bible)

Liberal religion and its gospel

In this passage we see another theme of liberal and prophetic religion, namely, that true ethics is something that comes from the heart and is characterized by love.

Liberal religion proclaims a gospel of love – the good news of sacrificial love, not sacrificial offerings; the good news of overflowing compassion, not strict obedience to the letter of the law. As the apostle Paul – who is more liberal than many liberals credit him – says a number of times, “The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit brings life.”

So, too, Hebrew prophets like Jeremiah looked for a time when Yahweh would make a new covenant with his people:

Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people.

(Jeremiah 31:33)

Modern liberal religion, following in the prophetic tradition, spawned the “Social Gospel,” attempting to bring the Kingdom of God – a realm of compassion, love, justice, and peace – to all peoples, on this earth, and in our time. Let not ritual, mythology, doctrine, or social practice stand in the way of creating such a Kingdom.

The ethical dimension in relation to our Fellowship

Quickly, how does the ethical dimension relate to this congregation?

It is of a piece with liberal religion in general, a vision of the ideals and values symbolized in a Kingdom of God that is here and now, in this life and on this earth, a vision that extends the sweep of the ethical imperative to include not only all humans but also other creatures and forms of life and being on this planet, and the care of this planet itself.

In the two years I have been here, I have found this congregation to be a remarkably caring and active religious community, concerned for the well-being of the members of this Fellowship, of this community, this nation, and our earth. And always with the desire to do more – to the point sometimes of being run a bit ragged.

But if you aren’t yet run completely ragged, and if you want to become more involved in the arena of social concerns, there will be an opportunity tomorrow evening to join a newly-forming Social Action and Educational Committee. That meeting will take place here in our sanctuary beginning at 7 p.m.

Part of the importance of a religious community is the support and strength we give each other in living out the ethical life of our liberal religious heritage.

The ethical dimension in individual life

Finally, and again very briefly, how does the ethical dimension of religion relate to us as individuals?

Today I have spoken mostly of social ethics, but let me end with a brief word about the importance of personal ethics, the importance of developing and maintaining personal integrity and such qualities as: honesty, truthfulness, trustworthiness, reliability, and humility.

Put negatively, there is to be no cheating, no fudging, no shortcuts, no bending of the rules to favor yourself. Put positively, there is to be an enlargement of the spirit of generosity, gratitude, and goodwill to all.

Our personal ethics must be of one piece with our social ethics, for our action in the world is undercut if there is a disconnect between the way we live our personal lives and the life we would ask others to lead.

Further, by attending to our personal behavior and attitudes, and by discovering and uncovering our own temptations and failings, we will be less prone to self-righteousness and more prone to empathetic understanding and compassion.

We will always fall short of the ethical ideal. That is a given. But part of the ethical ideal is to learn from our shortcomings and failures and not to beat up on ourselves or others. We are all on this road together.

Thus, let us practice self-forgiveness as well as the forgiveness of others as we strive in our individual lives to practice what the apostle Paul calls the “fruit of the spirit” – qualities of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22, The Jerusalem Bible) With respect to these virtues, there can be no law.

Benediction

Love is the doctrine of this church,
And service its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.
(James Vila Blake)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on October 1, 2006. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)