

“Dimensions of Religion: The Social Dimension”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
October 8, 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 blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
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)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.

MINISTER: It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person.

CONGREGATION: It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinions.

MINISTER: It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks.

MINISTER: It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress.

CONGREGATION: This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

(Kenneth L. Patton)

Meditation

Let us enter into our time of meditation and prayer with these verses of poet Rainer Maria Rilke from “Autumn Day”:

Lord: it is time. The huge summer has gone by.
Now overlap the sundials with your shadows,
and on the meadows let the wind go free.

Command the fruits to swell on tree and vine;
grant them a few more warm transparent days,
urge them on to fulfillment then, and press
the final sweetness into the heavy wine.

(Ahead of All Parting, edited and translated by Steven Mitchell)

Reading

Today I will be speaking about the social dimension of religion. This has to do, first, with how religion relates to and meets our needs as social beings; and, secondly, with the actual shape a religious community takes in the world, not what a religion says it would like to be or intends to be, but what it actually is in the world.

Last year our Long-Range Planning Committee, in attempting to look to the future of this congregation and after many interviews with members and friends of the congregation, hammered out a series of ten statements that were intended to express the primary aims and purposes of this congregation. Those primary purposes were endorsed at a special congregational meeting last May 21st when we were deciding whether to proceed with the possibility of a building expansion.

On that Sunday I also gave a sermon on these ten purposes – “Defining a Vision, Shaping a Mission” – and this morning, as we look at the social dimension of religion, I’d like to read these statements again. They are certainly not the only way of expressing our aims and intentions as a congregation, but they are a way.

As I read them, you may ask yourself: How do we as a congregation measure up to these purposes? Are we embodying them? What might be added or adjusted with respect to these statements?

The ten primary purposes are these:

- to be a Welcoming Community that invites all interested persons to have a part in creating and fostering a liberal religious congregation;

- to be a Thoughtful Community that provides its members and friends with a safe structure and nourishing context in which to address life's ongoing questions and develop and refine their personal religious philosophies;
- to be a Worshipping Community that regularly gathers to consider and celebrate its own life and life as a whole and that through its religious services helps to awaken and maintain in its members and friends a sense of wonder about life and being;
- to be a Caring Community that lovingly attends to the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being of its members and friends and that marks and celebrates the typical stages of a human life;
- to be a Teaching Community that blesses and supports its families in raising children who are healthy in body, mind, soul and spirit and that passes on to its children its rich religious heritage;
- to be an Exploring Community that offers its members and friends, from childhood to older age, a wide variety of educational, musical, artistic, social, and recreational opportunities for enriching their lives;
- to be an Involved Community that knows it does not exist for itself alone and reaches out to the local community and world to engage and support its social, ethical, environmental, artistic, and spiritual endeavors and concerns;
- to be an Environmentally Responsible Community that understands in a deep way its connection to Earth and seeks to tread lightly upon it and to promote sustainability;
- to be a Connecting Community that covenants to deepen and strengthen the ties that exist between members and friends of the Fellowship and between Unitarian Universalist congregations at both district and national levels and that values and seeks to work with the interfaith community both locally and at large; and
- to be a Self-Governing Community that responsibly establishes processes and requirements for its governance and the conducting of its purposes.

“DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION: THE SOCIAL DIMENSION”

Defining our religious nature

This is the fifth sermon of a six-part series on religion and religious community. In each sermon I have begun by distinguishing narrower and broader definitions and understandings of what it means to be religious.

The narrower or more restrictive definition and understanding is, ironically, the more popular one, namely, that an individual is religious by virtue of being connected in some way to an organized religion.

The broader definition and understanding, on the other hand, is one favored by many scholars and students of religion, namely, that one is religious by virtue of being human and having to determine ultimate values and allegiances.

This broader definition of what it means to be religious is not an arbitrary or pedantic one; there are good reasons why one should consider using this broader understanding, namely, that it more accurately takes into account our human situation.

Let me give the following analogy:

Most people would agree that we are “social beings.” Biologically, genetically, we have evolved and are structured as social creatures. More than most species, we need the support of others for many years just to survive and make it into adulthood, and the urge to interact and be with others of our kind is strong throughout our lives.

Indeed, there are many kinds of social organizations to which one can belong: clubs, guilds, societies, associations, parties, teams, and so forth. Such social organizations both reflect our nature as social beings and help us meet our needs as social creatures. But we are not social beings because we belong to some social group or another. It’s the other way around: we create social organizations because we are social beings.

Now, it’s true, there are some individuals who prefer not to belong to social organizations. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t social beings. It’s just that they may not find social organizations helpful in meeting their social needs, and, instead, find other ways of expressing and meeting these needs.

And one more thing: we might regard the beliefs and practices of some social groups to be ill-conceived and wrong-headed. We might judge some social groups to be dangerous and even destructive to society at large, and some individuals within these groups to be selfishly seeking personal power or financial gain. I doubt, however, that we would say we should get rid of all social groups or try to repress our social nature.

And now to complete the analogy and make my point with regard to humans as religious beings:

I am arguing that we are religious creatures in much the same way that we are social creatures. Biologically, genetically, we have evolved and are structured as religious beings – that is, beings who must question the meaning and value of their life in the face of the knowledge of their death; beings who must orient themselves within this vast cosmos and determine how they will live their lives and what they will give themselves to and serve.

Religions and religious organizations of many kinds have emerged as a way of responding to and dealing with these religious needs and concerns. These religions and their organizations both reflect our religious nature and are attempts to deal with that nature. But we are not religious beings because we belong to some organized religion. It's the other way around: we create religious organizations because we are religious beings.

Again, not everyone chooses to belong to a religious organization. But this doesn't make these persons less religious. It just means they may not find religious organizations helpful in meeting their religious needs, and that they find other ways of expressing and meeting those needs.

And, finally: We might regard the beliefs and practices of certain religions to be ill-conceived and wrong-headed. We might judge some religious groups to be dangerous and even destructive to society at large, and some individuals within these groups simply out for personal power or financial gain. But does this mean we should try to get rid of all religious groups or try to repress our religious nature?

As I recall, the Communists tried to do this in various parts of the world in the 20th century. They identified religion as an opiate and enemy of people and progress, and attempted to suppress and smash religious institutions, acting as if humans were not religious creatures. By the time their attempt to rid society of religion and its organizations imploded, it proved to be a dangerous and destructive experiment; and, indeed, the Communist Party itself bore many of the marks of being a religion and a religious organization.

I hope this comparison between our social nature and our religious nature makes clearer my definition and understanding of what it means to be religious creatures.

The social dimension of religion in general

Turning now to the social dimension of religion. As in previous weeks, I will look at this dimension in four ways: first, at the social dimension of religion in general; secondly, with respect to liberal religion and our Unitarian Universalist congregations; then, to this Fellowship; and, finally, to us individually.

As I said in the introduction to my reading, the social dimension of religion has to do with how religion relates to and meets our needs as social beings; and, secondly, with the actual shape of a religious community, both with respect to itself as a particular group and as this group meets the larger world and culture.

Beginning, then, with religion as it relates to and meets the needs of our social nature. Dr. James Luther Adams, a prominent Unitarian theologian, believed that the role of organized religion with respect to meeting our social needs is greater in our modern world, and particularly in modern America, than perhaps ever before.

This is because, for the most part, we in modern America lack the kind of community that adequately meets our social needs. We don't live anymore in anything like manageable, self-contained and self-sufficient communities where we know, depend upon, and care for the other members of our community. Modern America is characterized by being a mobile, fast-paced, consumer-driven, materialistically-oriented society, with a bottom-line economic engine that tends to drive over and drive out values related to true community.

Amid the push and pull of our modern life with its anonymity, its scatter, its flatness, its paucity of philosophical thought, its craving to be entertained, its obsession with celebrity, its fascination with violence, its separation from nature, its denial of death, its repression of depression, and its avoidance of grief – out of this landscape, a hunger arises and a thirst is felt.

It is the hunger and thirst for authentic community and for spiritual grounding, the desire to know and to be known, the longing to love and to be loved, and to be part of a supporting group that provides a port in the storm where one can anchor and a center in the midst of the scatter where one can gain perspective.

Thus, James Luther Adams identified two main roles for religious institutions in our modern society. What modern people are looking for, and what modern people need, he says, are two things essentially: a sense of intimacy and a sense of ultimacy. Intimacy – connected to a community of fellow humans. Ultimacy – connected to a depth that grounds you and a height that opens you.

The social shape of a religious group

A second aspect of the social dimension of religion has to do with the *actual* practice and shape of a religious group, apart from its stated ideals. That is, when you bring together the rituals, myths, doctrines, and ethical ideals, what does this *actually* mean in terms of how a particular religious organization and community takes shape? How do the members of a given religious community actually live their lives? How do they treat each other? What kind of community and society do they create for themselves? And, secondly, how does a particular religious group regard and relate to the larger world and culture?

This is a huge subject that I don't have time to explore at this time, but the scope of this subject relates to the relationship of religious teaching and society.

In sacral societies – those in which the teaching of the religion forms the ideals of conduct for a society – there is the ongoing question of how to coordinate ancient teaching with modern life. And even within a sacral society that is dominated by a given religion, there may be denominational conflicts as to whose rules and practices should prevail in the society – conflicts like the current one in Iraq between Shia and Sunni, or in Christian history between Catholic and Protestant.

And then in a secular society such as ours, in which the institutions of religion and government are separated or supposed to be separated, there is the ongoing question of what code of conduct is to prevail in the larger society when there are a variety of religious organizations with their own visions of what constitutes the appropriate way to live.

This, as I say, is a huge subject that I don't have time to go into further today.

The social dimension of religion in liberal religion and Unitarian Universalist congregations

Let me turn, then, to the social dimension of religion in relation to liberal religion and our Unitarian Universalist congregations.

We have what is called a congregational style of organization in our religious societies, where authority for the governance of a congregation rests entirely with the individual congregation.

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations are member societies of an association – not a denomination, though we sometimes use the term – but, technically, an association, a free association of congregations, each of which is responsible for its own governance, its own by-laws, its own rules for membership, its own selection of leadership, both lay and ministerial.

Thus, we are an association or a communion of autonomous congregations. But this is quite different, as Unitarian historian Conrad Wright says, than simply being an independent or completely autonomous congregation. (Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice, p. 12)

Having been a minister for over twenty years in a completely independent and autonomous congregation, I can tell you there are significant differences, which I am still learning.

One of those differences is the district and national conferences that are held yearly. Last year the annual district conference was held here at Fort Worden, with our congregation playing an important role in making that happen.

And this year – this will be my first advertisement for this – our annual national conference, called the General Assembly, will be held in Portland, Oregon on the dates of June 20-24. I'd like to think that every Unitarian Universalist should experience at least one of these national assemblies in a lifetime, and this year is a great opportunity to do so.

But I'm talking here about how we govern and form our religious societies, which, of course, influences their social shape.

Our ideal has been to promote a great breadth of individual liberty in our religious societies, to create places where people can be free – free to think, free to explore, free to associate.

So the question is: What can a community look like with such an expanse of freedom? And the challenge is: How do you maintain and support such a community of free individuals?

Sometimes in our Unitarian Universalist congregations in our desire to honor the liberty of the individual, to respect the inherent dignity and worth of every person, we have neglected the community as a whole. The group is held hostage an individual and tyranny reigns where freedom was intended.

Thus, if our societies are to thrive and be places of true freedom, if they are to be sanctuaries for the life of the mind and the growth of the spirit, then we must affirm the boundaries of that sanctuary. We must vigilantly protect the order and guard the process that permits freedom for the entire community.

It's my belief that true community and true freedom for the individual are not inherently at odds with each other, but rather that they support each other. Both are needed for each to thrive. That is to say, a true community creates space for individual freedom; and the free individual supported by that community has a desire to give back to the community and make it a richer and more rewarding community.

A tension between ideal and the actual

Let me also mention with regard to the social dimension of religion a tension that exists in our religiously liberal congregations between our ideals and our actual social shape as congregations.

As our Unitarian Universalist name indicates, we teach a message of the essential unity of humanity for all peoples, and we have an ideal of being a universal religious community that might appeal to and bring together persons of many economic, ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds, as well as persons of diverse theologies.

In matter of fact, the actual shape of our communities are usually not all that universal, and in certain ways at this time in our history there is little diversity. Our congregations are highly correlated with universities, mostly urban, primarily of European ancestry, more white-collar than blue, more professional than laborer, generally well-off financially, and increasingly Democratic rather than Republican in political orientation.

Our situation in this regard reminds me a bit of poet Walt Whitman who wanted to write for the everyday person and who extolled the virtues of the common person, but it was not the “everyday person” that read Whitman’s poetry or cared for his message.

I don't say there is anything necessarily to do about this situation, for particularly with regard to religious communities, people join where they feel themselves most comfortable, where they feel themselves most wanted and needed, and where they find their particular needs being most clearly met.

Our task, it seems to me, is, first, to be the best that we can be in our present historical situation, with our particular strengths and our limitations, and not to wring our hands too much about what we are not. And, secondly, to continually examine ourselves, open ourselves, and expand ourselves – to live out more completely the universalist ethic we would profess; for in so doing we might find that our congregations will be more attractive to a more diverse humanity, and thus our actual shape would better match our sense of the ideal.

The social dimension of religion at QUUF

What does the social dimension of religion look like here in this Fellowship?

As it happens, we are right in the middle of significant changes that will shift the social shape of this congregation. Let me give you an example:

This past Friday evening, Flossie and I had an all-staff dinner at our house, something we've done at the beginning of each church year since we came here. It's a social occasion, a time to get to know each other better, a time to explore our common purposes as a staff.

Do you know how many persons are now on the paid staff of this little Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship? Thirteen! Only one of those is full-time – myself – and several very part-time, but still thirteen persons are listed on our bulletin cover as part of the staff.

So, interestingly, on this occasion of this all-staff gathering, a number of the staff had to be introduced to each other – had never met before, did not know the names or roles of other members on the staff.

Obviously, this is a far different situation than the close-knit, lay-led, non-staffed community of not too many years ago where everyone in the Fellowship knew everyone else in the Fellowship.

I give this as an example of the way in which the growth in a group changes the dynamic and social shape of a group.

But what is a congregation to do? What is this congregation to do? It seems to me there were only two real possible choices before this congregation: 1) To expand our facilities to be able to welcome those in this area in search of a spiritual base and a religious home, and who wanted to be part of this Fellowship; or, 2) To start some kind of satellite

congregation. What was not possible, it seems to me, if this congregation were to be true to its heritage and its ideals, was to pull in, push away, and close off.

Thus, the congregation voted to go forward, and chose to go forward with a building expansion.

This decision represents an act of faith in the future, a faith that has been tested before when this congregation was faced with past decisions about membership growth and whether to build or not to build. And, as before, this decision will change the social dynamic and shape of this community in ways that cannot be known in advance.

Thus, as a community we are entering upon a challenging and exciting time, a time fraught with possibilities for both gladness and sadness. There will be change. There will be new opportunities. And there will be “necessary losses.”

And let me also say, as I did in my October newsletter, that it seems natural to me that there would be different levels of enthusiasm and excitement among us for this building expansion.

But it is my hope that each and every member of this congregation will feel free to contribute to this project as seems appropriate to him or her, so that in the end, having acted with personal integrity, having participated in the process, you will feel even more fully a part of this wonderful religious community.

And this is a wonderful religious community. I hope you have some sense of how truly wonderful it is – which is part of the reason why people want to be part of it.

Of course, we can always improve; we can always come closer to our ideal of being a true “Beloved Community” for ourselves, and we can always do better in reaching out to others.

Sometimes religious organizations are accused of hypocrisy. And sometimes those charges are valid. But sometimes those charges are not valid, because falling short of an ideal is not the same as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is putting forth an ideal that you have no intention of trying to follow. But putting forth an ideal and then missing the target is not hypocrisy. Rather, it is a short step, or sideways step, or backward step along the way.

Religious communities, I believe, are places for human beings who are in process, not for human beings who are already perfect. Or, to use conventional language, they are places for sinners, not saints.

The social dimension of religion in individual life

And now to conclude with the social dimension of religion in your individual and personal life:

May this Fellowship be for you a place to continually grow your spirit and to grow your friendships, a place that meets your needs of both ultimacy and intimacy.

May you find here those who you want to be your friends, persons of like-mind and spirit, persons who share common goals and interests.

And finding your spirit's home, may you also then be brave enough to be open your home to those who may also be looking for a home.

A religious home is legitimately a place that meets our needs as social beings. That's always been an important element in religious organizations, and even more so in our modern world – to be part of a community where you know others and are known by others; to be part of a community where you love others and are loved by others:

May this place be such a place for you, and may you help to make this place such a place for others as well.

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 8, 2006. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)