

# Religion Beyond Belief

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When I was a parish minister I used to hear the same sad story over and over from people who were raised in one faith but had felt forced to leave it. They told stories of being driven from their religious homes because they simply could no longer believe the teachings. In fact, our congregations often serve as religious refugee centers for doubters and heretics. I know this story well, for it is my story, too.

Millions of Americans have felt abandoned by the religious communities in which they were raised. When they were very young, the church was a kind of extended family. It was a place where they belonged, where they were accepted, where they felt safe. However, there was a price of admission. They had to pretend to believe the church's dogma. When they couldn't do it any longer, they were told they no longer fit. Many have left all religion behind. In fact, "no religion" is now America's single largest religious group.

There is a newer story one hears today. Many people today are raised with no religious affiliation. This is common among people under 40. They come wondering if there is something more than a life spent pursuing success. They have no bad memories of indoctrination and rigidity. They do not come seeking refuge from orthodoxy. They come seeking community and an escape from banality and emptiness.

And yet there is one basic belief that almost all of us share with the most conservative, reactionary and fundamentalist religious extremists. It is an idea that we also share, ironically enough, with hard-core atheists who are opposed to all religion. Almost all of us have accepted the notion that

religion is about what we believe. The first question most people ask about a religion is, “What do they believe?”

So we get questions like, “So what do you Unitarian Universalists believe, anyway? Is it true you can just believe anything you want?”

When someone asks us what Unitarian Universalists believe, we tend to give answers that are long, vague, and tedious. We aren’t comfortable with the question. We squirm. We fidget. We struggle. Often we talk about what we don’t believe.

The trouble is that we treat the question, “What do you believe?” as a legitimate and natural question. After all, religion is about what we believe, isn’t it?

No! No. Religion is not about what you or I or Baptists or Catholics or Jews or Muslims or Hindus *believe*. I would even go a giant step further: *Belief is the enemy of religion*. Let me repeat that: ***Belief is the enemy of religion***.

Perhaps I should explain.

We are so immersed in a culture that views religion as a matter of what people believe that we think this is the way it has always been. It isn’t. All of this emphasis on what someone believes is actually very modern and very western.

I sometimes cite an extreme example to make this point. Buddhism is a major world religion. Yet Buddhism has no theology at all in the way we use the word. Buddhists don’t believe anything, at least not anything that is a set of propositions. Buddhism doesn’t even have a god in the usual sense.

But, of course, Buddhism might strike us as a bit esoteric and foreign. Well, let’s take a look at the religious culture out of which most of us came — the Christian and Jewish traditions.

Jews have never had anything like a creed, a statement of belief. Ironically, Jesus, about whom there are all sorts of creeds, probably never encountered a creed in his life. The whole idea of a creed would have been foreign. Jews did have a definite sense of God, to be sure.

However, the key to the God of the Jews is that he gave the Hebrew people the law. The Hebrew scriptures never show any interest in what people believe. The scriptures show a lot of interest in what people *do*. They are supposed to love God and follow the commandments. The great prophets were concerned with justice, compassion and being faithful to the covenant. They had no interest in doctrine.

The early Christian communities, while they did show more concern with what people believed, actually tolerated a lot of variety.

Islam, the next great religious movement, also has little theology. Its statement of faith is that there is no God but God and that Mohammed is his prophet. This is a way of insisting, as did the Jews, that there is only one God. The great emphasis in Islam is with what the the faithful are supposed to do, not what they are supposed to think.

All the emphasis on religion as belief does not come on the scene until much later. It started with the Catholic Church and its creeds, but it really got intense with the Reformation. All of this emphasis on religion being about believing the right things is really a modern development.

Even the whole idea of belief has gotten twisted. The word used to be used in a very different way. "Belief" once meant "what I give my heart to" or what I commit myself to. Belief was linked to emotion and action. To say I believe we should be kind to one another is a very different kind of belief that to say I believe Jesus really turned water into wine. Belief did not mean agreeing with a set of metaphysical or theological propositions.

Actually, even in religions that emphasize belief, beliefs change over time. It is no longer a heresy to believe that the sun is the center of the solar system. Today the Catholic Church accepts biological evolution. So one

can be a faithful Catholic today by believing what a Catholic would have been burned for believing a few centuries ago. Lots of American Protestant churches once taught that slavery was God's plan.

Even in the religions that care the most about what people believe, beliefs change over time. Yet the religion goes on and on. So the religion is not simply what its followers believe.

Yet I want to make a more radical point. The point is that religious belief is actually the enemy of religion. Every religious tradition seeks to impart a sense of wonder, of mystery, of awe, of humility. Belief systems stop this cold. Once we think we have explained it all, once we think we have all the answers, we become arrogant, belligerent and defensive.

Just look at what happens when a religious creed takes hold. What follows is truly horrible. First, we categorize everyone who does not agree with us as either ignorant or evil. If we have the truth and are certain we have it, then our task in life becomes spreading this truth. We also feel we must defend the truth from all of those who disagree. Believers have enemies everywhere. The world becomes a battleground. This is the world of Muslim fundamentalists blowing up innocent people and of Christian fundamentalists trying to criminalize gays and lesbians. This is the world of John Calvin burning fellow Christian Michael Servetus alive because Servetus did not agree with the doctrine of the trinity. This is the world of the Spanish Inquisition.

Once a religion becomes an all encompassing belief system, murder will surely follow. Believers are dangerous. They always have been.

So, if religion isn't really about what we believe, then what is it about? Can we be religious without a belief system?

I am convinced that religion without belief is the best religion. Religion that is focused on belief is a dangerous corruption of true religion.

Religion without belief is not phony religion. It isn't fake religion or pretend religion or partial religion or religion lite. I have heard critics of liberal religion complain that ours is church where people can believe anything they want. Actually, that is not true. I cannot truly believe anything I want. I would love to believe that I will live to be 900 years old and will play professional baseball. What is important about liberal religion is that you and I don't have to pretend to believe what we don't believe. We don't have to lie. But most importantly, we don't get caught up in endless ridiculous debates about whose beliefs are correct.

The problem with asking what someone believes is that it is the wrong question.

True religion is about what we love, not about what we think. True religion is about what you and I hold sacred. The practice of true religion is faithfulness to what we love.

The key religious questions you and I must answer are these: What do we love so much that we are moved to tears? What gives us unspeakable joy? What gives us peace beyond understanding? What do we love so much that it calls us to action? What do we care about so deeply that we willingly, joyfully, devote our lives to it?

When we focus on what we truly love, we ask life's essential questions. We ask questions like, "How shall I live?" When we ask the question together, it becomes, "How shall we live together? What can we create together?" When we focus on what we truly love, we discover something wonderful: we discover that we love the same things.

We realize that we need one another. We want to be compassionate and gentle with one another. We want to raise children who are kind, joyful and responsible. We want to create a place where we can come to know one

another more deeply. We want to create a space where we can cry together, laugh together, sing together, learn together, and act together. We want a place where we can come together to remind ourselves of what is truly worthwhile. That is what worship is—it is literally an affirmation of worth.

And we want to make a difference in the world. We are not content to be a club. We know there are hundreds, thousands, of neighbors who love what we love. And if they love what we love, they have the same religion we do. We open our hearts and our doors to them.

Religion beyond belief is the religion millions of people long for. It is religion that transcends culture, race and class. It is religion where we can grow spiritually, a religion where we can forge deep and lasting relationships, a religion where we can join hands to help heal a broken world.

The central issue before us as a religious movement is not to decide what we believe. That will just set us to arguing among ourselves until the theological cows come home. (Trust me, the theological cows have been gone for millennia and they're not coming home in our lifetime.)

No, the central issue before us all is whether we will accept the challenge to become a religion beyond belief. We live at a time when religious tribalism kills people every day. Fundamentalists try to force their beliefs on others. Millions upon millions want no part of that kind of religion.

Yet the options offered by secular consumer culture are empty. People know that consumerism is a false god. Modern society, with its mobility, has eroded the network of relationships that gave people a deep sense of belonging and transcendence. Studies in social psychology show us that modern Americans are the loneliest people who have ever lived.

People, millions of them, seek a community where they can nurture relationships, raise children, deepen spiritually, and serve a mission that is

worthy of their highest ideals. What these millions are seeking is a religion beyond belief.

This is our challenge. We must know what we love. And then we must let that love guide us. This, my friends, is true religion. It is not really religion without belief. It is religion beyond belief. It is a religion to be lived and experienced. This is the religion our world so desperately needs. This, I am convinced, is what we are called to be.

May true religion, the religion of what we love, guide us today and always. Let us create a religion beyond belief.

So may it be. Amen.