

# *In The Name of Religion*

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Sometimes a sermon which is announced three weeks before it is to be written gets preempted. Unexpected events, a chance conversation, a mental block, or even an intestinal upset have a way of altering or delaying the promised message, from time to time. Last Sunday, in the course of the discussion following the sermon, Lou Schindel asked whether I thought religion--by which I assume he meant organized religion--was a positive or negative force in the world at this moment. The question served to release a number of insights I have not explored from the pulpit for nearly six years. Try as I would, I could not push his question from my mind in order to make room for the sermon I had announced. And so, this morning, I would like to spend our time together thinking aloud about the role of religion in our history and our culture. This is not such a bad time for such a discussion, given the fact that today is not only Halloween--a time devoted to examining the scarier aspects of human existence, it is also the anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg four hundred and seventy-six years ago.

In the year 1095 of the common era, responding to the urging of Pope Urban II, much of western Europe picked up and marched to the east, determined to wrest control of the holy sites of Christendom from Islamic infidels. It was the first of what history would call the crusades. Two hundred years later, when the crusading fever had burned itself out, the holy places of Palestine were still controlled by the Islamic peoples. Uncounted numbers of women and men and children had died in this quixotic effort to serve religion through organized slaughter. Further uncounted numbers of men and children and women had been sold into slavery. Europe had created a pattern of relationship with the middle east still in effect today, and established other ominous precedents which haunt us into this century: for example, on their way east, in service to the Christian God, crusaders often marauded through towns and small villages along the route, seeking out members of the Jewish community, slaughtering women and children and men who happened to practice the wrong faith. All of this bloodshed was accomplished in the name of religion.

The example of the crusades was not lost on the leaders of the church. In the year 1209 of the common era, frustrated in the attempt to eradicate the Catharist or Albigensian heresy in southern France, the Pope called for a crusade against these simple folk who persisted in defying the authority and the traditional teachings of the Roman Church. The result was a brutal war of extermination against people who were, for the most part, armed only with their peculiar religious convictions. The war was carried out, and the Albigensians were exterminated in the name of religion.

In the year 1492 of the common era, Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile and Aragon ordered the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian peninsula. A population which had been productive and loyal citizens for centuries was faced with the alternative of renouncing their faith, or abandoning their homes. Thousands left. Those who converted and remained were hunted mercilessly by the inquisition, lest their conversions be not sincere. This brutal act, one of many similar expulsions in Europe, was justified in the name of religion.

In the year 1553 of the common era, in Geneva, Switzerland, a city under the control of John Calvin and his Protestants, a Spanish physician and theologian named Michael Servetus was tried for heresy, condemned to death, led forth from his cell, chained to a post, and, with his offending books strapped to his thigh, burned to death. The ashes of Servetus and of his books were scattered, lest they become a focus of heretical dissent. The martyrdom of Servetus--only one of the more famous of many such martyrdoms--was accomplished in order to protect the public from dangerous ideas, and it was justified in the name of religion.

From the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries in Europe and for a time in North America, uncounted numbers of women were denounced as witches, tortured, and put to death in a variety of cruel and painful ways. How many died in this persecution no one knows for sure, but some authorities suggest that the numbers rival or perhaps even exceed those of the Nazi holocaust. Most of the victims of the witch hunts were elderly women, living alone, no longer able to contribute to the economic welfare of the community, and in some cases, emotionally unstable. They were an economic liability, a source of embarrassment, a cause of fear and resentment. And so they were hunted and hounded, tortured into confessing incredible behaviors, and killed by their children and grandchildren. And the deed was done and justified in the name of religion.

We could spend our time together today continuing the list of horrors committed in the name of religion over the course of human history and come nowhere near exhausting the subject. Nor has this peculiar behavior ended with the coming of the twentieth century. One need only reflect upon the religious wars between Moslems and Hindus, between Moslems and Jews, between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, between capitalists and communists which have characterized this bloody century--wars which continue in some form to the present day--to understand that the power of religion to justify murder and mayhem is still a present reality.

And lest we think this a behavior of other, less enlightened people, but not of us, I would remind you that in every war this nation has ever fought, we have justified whatever action we deemed necessary--from the genocidal wars against Native Americans to the fire-bombing of Dresden and the Atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki--in the name of religion. Abraham Lincoln noted the irony that in our Civil War, both sides prayed to the same God. It has been a subject of frequent commentary that in the First and Second World Wars, both sides sang

the same Christmas Carols. Nonetheless, we have never doubted that we acted with God's blessing and in the name of true religion.

And lest we think that it is only the less rational forms of religious belief which lend themselves to this usage, I would remind you of a seldom recounted vignette from our own history. When the United States entered the First World War, the American Unitarian Association--that guarantor of congregational autonomy, that bastion of reason, freedom and tolerance in religion--not only announced its unqualified support of the government's war aims, but warned that it would not permit any kind of financial aid to flow to Unitarian churches whose ministers failed to endorse those war aims. In protest, John Haynes Holmes and his congregation in New York City withdrew from the association. When the war was over, the Association apologized for its breach of religious freedom, and eventually the Community Church of New York returned to the association. But during the war, the Association had no doubt that the United States acted in the name of religion and of religion's god, and the American Unitarian Association had no doubt about its own responsibility to lend religious authority to political and military policies.

I recount this dismal litany to remind us of several truths we often fail to remember. The first of these is that religion is a serious business with enormous potential consequences for individual human beings and for the entire human venture. Most of the time, we tend to regard religion as a rather benign undertaking, which is generally supportive of beneficial social attitudes and benevolent values systems. Most of the time we tend to regard religious institutions as on a par with the Rotary, the Kiwanis, the Masons, or a variety of other institutions which provide a social outlet for those who need it, and which, in the process, accomplish a modicum of social good. In the relative tranquility of our daily lives, we tend to forget the terrible latent power which lies hidden under the surface of ordinary religious institutions, and the even greater power which lies waiting to be tapped in the unexploited and unexplored religious needs of average individuals.

The second of these truths is that contrary to our usual assumption, religion rarely functions in a prophetic way to challenge the prevailing social opinions or attitudes. Quite the contrary, throughout most of its history religion has been the glue which has held the social consensus together, and it has performed that function by finding cosmic justification for social, political, economic practices which a given culture cherishes or regards as necessary. Religion draws its power from the fact that it does not question the behaviors which are understood to be central to a given social consensus. Rather, it confirms and ratifies and justifies those behaviors, allowing us to believe that whatever we do is in response to a higher imperative. Oh, to be sure, most religions are filled with prohibitions, with lists of behaviors which are not acceptable, but for the most part those restrictions concern how the individual functions within the society and rarely challenge the underlying assumptions of the social structure itself. At this level, religion

functions to ease our consciences and permit us to believe that distasteful as any given policy, behavior or course of action may be, we really do not have a viable alternative.

The third of these truths grows directly out of the other two. Because of the enormous potential power which religion exerts upon the lives of individuals and cultures, and because of the manner in which religion functions to justify social systems, to insulate them from criticism, and to enervate individual consciences, religion may represent, and often has been a truly demonic force in human history. There is virtually no act so heinous that a religious justification for it cannot be found.

Not only the history of the human race, but its sacred scriptures themselves witness to the truth of that assertion. If you need another example, remember that in the book of Exodus, the murder of innocent Egyptian children--an act of political terrorism--was justified for reasons of state: to alter Pharaoh's policy toward Israel. And the deed was done by and the justification issued from the mouth of Yahweh himself. Religion is a dangerous and potentially destructive force in human life.

Given those facts, what are we doing here? Why are we in this place, involved in this particular religious institution? Perhaps the best answer I have found, over more than three decades in the trade, is this: Human beings are, by nature, religious animals. They seem to be driven by a need to relate their quotidian existence to cosmic concepts, to find in the events of daily life some hint of eternal significance. We are going to be religious whether we intend it or not. Because this is so, it is important to me, and I would hope to you, that our religious expression be as intentional as possible, so that it maybe examined and its function in our lives be understood. We are here because we understand that the religious impulse--the effort to relate our existence to a larger reality, to justify our living in terms which reflect more than the immediate moment--

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find expression in our lives. To the degree that the religious impulse is permitted to function unexamined, to precisely that degree we make ourselves vulnerable to manipulation by social and cultural forces we may not even recognize. To say this another way, we are part of a religious institution precisely because religion is too powerful, too dangerous, too potentially destructive a force to ignore.

In our congregations we seek to make religion a

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part of our lives; in our life as a congregation, we seek to create an atmosphere which will allow the invisible workings of unexamined assumptions to become

visible and to be examined on their merits. In short, we create and sustain our religious institutions in an effort to inoculate ourselves from the fanaticism and the blind assumption of virtue which, throughout the history of civilization, have permitted people to justify the most heinous behaviors in the name of religion and religion's god.

This, in itself, would be ample justification for our involvement in religious community. However, there is another reason in our times to be especially concerned with religion and with religious institutions. I have suggested that for the most part, religion draws its power from the fact that it does not challenge the social consensus, but confirms and justifies it. There are, however, moments in human history when the social consensus collapses under the weight of challenges and opportunities which cannot be met within traditional categories. When the world and our experience of it changes radically and rapidly, the old social patterns suddenly prove inadequate to provide the necessary structure for human existence. In that moment, religion finds itself faced with the need to generate new value systems, new ways of understanding the world, the human venture, and new structures of greatness in terms of which the human race may live with meaning and purpose.

Much of what I see happening around us suggests to me that we may be living in such a moment. The rise of religious fundamentalism among Christians, Moslems, Jews represents an effort to structure a social consensus which will fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the old world order. In a very real way it signals an attempt to build a new world order by refusing to accept the realities of our post-modern world. I would like to believe that such an effort is doomed to failure. However, religion has demonstrated repeatedly its ability to enlist human energy in defiance of reality. At the very least, the fundamentalist revival can provide justification for atrocities of all kinds as the world gropes its way toward a planetary civilization.

This suggests to me that we may have an important role to play at this moment in the history of the human venture. We live in a time when nothing is decided and therefore everything matters. We are called upon to play a role--potentially a unique role--in the process by which that new social consensus will come into being. We represent a tradition which understands that while the past may provide important insights into the human condition, it offers no finished chart for the future. We speak for a tradition which affirms that there are no questions which are forever answered, that there are no assumptions too sacred to be examined, that there are no mechanisms which guarantee the validity or the virtue of our actions. We affirm a tradition which insists that there are no adequate solutions to the challenges of our times which do not include all people, no salvation for one which does not imply the salvation of all. We incarnate a tradition which discovers the holy not out there somewhere, but here and now, in this beautiful world which is our home, and in the faces of those who share the planet with us. We proclaim a tradition which believes that the distinctions which divide us from

each other are as nothing in the face of our inescapable commonalities. We are shaped by a tradition which calls us to confront the riskiness of the religious venture and to protect ourselves and others from the dangers of believing we are possessed of the truth and are therefore licensed to do whatever our vision of truth demands.

In many ways, our religious tradition--at its best--offers crucial insights to a world suddenly facing the need to crystallize a planetary culture. In the chaos of the present world order, Unitarian Universalism has important insights to offer a global society in which all the ancient systems are proving impotent, in which a new cultural synthesis must be built. That we are few in numbers is no excuse for failing to add our voice, our insights, our experience to the global undertaking. As chaos theory suggests, in times of cultural transition, very small influences may become the attractor points around which the new order coalesces, the pivot around which a new synthesis may orbit. As someone has said, there is no distinction between us and history. There is only our lives in which history is lived.

It is important that we remember that the religious venture is always a powerful, dangerous, significant undertaking. In times like these it is fraught with special meaning and importance. As Unitarian Universalists, people who have found little comfort in the ancient creeds, people who have embraced the necessity of painful doubts, people who trust no finished charts, we are called to add our voice to those who would use this moment of opportunity to help construct a social consensus adequate to the inescapable global community in which we now must live our lives, a social consensus which does not bind us to the inadequacies of the past, but which points us toward the future, toward the endless reach of stars.