

# *Where's the "R" in Religious Education?*

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On a number of occasions recently, people new to our movement have stopped by our office or called me on the phone to inquire about Unitarian Universalism--what kind of religion it is, how it relates to other, more traditional religions, what we expect of our members, in terms of beliefs, and financial support and all the rest. Such conversations always present a challenge to me; I am never sure just how much detail people want--whether to dump the extended version upon them, or to risk misrepresenting our faith in the interest of brevity. I try to explain that we seek to maintain a religious community which does not depend upon conformity of belief for its cohesion, but rather upon a willingness to be open to the graciousness of the world and the significance of our own experience as sources of spiritual growth. I try to explain that we are much more concerned about how we live together on this earth than we are about agreeing upon the nature of ultimate reality or providing fire insurance in some future life. Often, after I have done my best to describe who we are and what we cherish, the newcomer will comment that this sounds like an interesting approach for adults, but it is difficult to see how this kind of religion could be communicated effectively to children. What are the goals of our Religious Education program? How do we go about it?

In responding to these questions, I find myself acutely aware of the fact that over my years as minister of the church, I have seldom addressed the matter of religious education from the pulpit. I have fallen into the pattern, which our geography makes so seductive, of accepting a division between what happens at this end of Waldron Avenue and what goes on at the other end of the street. In truth, I believe that in many ways the measure of a religious community is to be found in its ministry to its children. And so, this morning, when the future of our education ministry is so much on our minds, I would like to think aloud with you about the religious education mission of this congregation.

Let me begin by suggesting that I hold as a basic assumption that religious education is not confined to a program for children. It is my firm conviction that all of us are always in the process of growing, changing, incorporating new insights, struggling with new problems, confronting unexpected challenges, and therefore we are always in the process of learning about and building a faith. That is why we refer to our program of religious education as a life-span" program--to combat the assumption that religious education is something we do to children rather than something that happens to all of us, all the time. Having said that, however, let me confess that the focus of my concern this morning is with the program we offer our children.

The truth is that adult programs have a built-in corrective. If those programs are inadequate or fail to meet our needs, people stop attending and the program is changed.

With children, however, there is not so direct a self-corrective mechanism. Children often are a captive audience and the result is that if we are not careful, by the time they are old enough to let us know what they think of our program, we will have had ample time to teach them that religion is dull, boring and totally unrelated to their daily lives.

One of the great handicaps we face in devising a program of religious education for our children is a persistent conviction--perhaps growing out of our own experience with higher education--that religious education should be focused on a body of information which is to be imparted to the client (or, depending upon your point of view, the victim). It is often assumed that religious education aims at providing the student with data concerning something called religion; and therefore, the success or failure of the program ought to be amenable to pragmatic evaluation. Can the students who have been through the program repeat the ten commandments? Do they know the Buddha's eight-fold path? Can they recite the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes? Do they know anything about the Bible, the Koran, the Bagivad Gita, the Upanishads, the Tao Te Ching? Can they identify Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Isaiah, Amos, Lao Tse? Do they know who George de Benneville, Joseph Priestley, Augusta Chapin, Faustus Soccinus, Francis David, Abner Kneeland, Caroline Soule and Mary A. Livermore were and the role they played in the history of our movement? (It is assumed, of course, that we adults know the answers to these questions sufficiently well to teach them.) The success of the program may be judged by how many of those questions can be answered affirmatively.

There are a number of problems with this approach to religious education. To begin with, in our free churches, there is seldom a firm consensus about what is important for people to know about religion. One individual wants the focus to be on Bible, the Jewish and Christian traditions, and learning a few religious classics, like the twenty-third psalm. Another is more concerned about world religions and the truths they all share in common. Yet another wants to be sure children learn about Unitarian Universalism and still another wants the focus to be on ethics and morals and how they apply to contemporary issues. The danger is that sometimes we end up with a program which bows gently in the direction of those who are most vocal, which seeks to give as little offense as possible to those who differ and is thus a program of uncertain thrust and direction. Worst of all, it can be a program which treats our children as a captive audience, which has a primary goal of meeting the needs of adults and the institution rather than the children.

But perhaps the major problem with this approach to religious education is that it misunderstands the meaning of the term "religious" in the title. It is my firm conviction, after nearly four decades in the trade, that religious education programs never can convey sufficient information about religion to justify the time, money and effort spent upon them. The fact is that the most conscientiously faithful participant in our children's religious education program will be in class for about fifty minutes every Sunday for approximately thirty Sundays a year. A quick check with the pocket calculator demonstrates that we have, at most, 25 hours a year for formal instruction. And most children, of course, receive considerably less instruction time. Add to this the fact that religion is not a simple subject to teach, and that its basic texts are among the most complex, arcane and sophisticated materials ever produced by the human race. Given the

time constraints, it soon becomes obvious that children in our church schools will learn little about religion as a subject, and because of the complexity of the material, much of what they learn may be so over-simplified as to be simply wrong. They may learn to repeat the Lord's prayer or the beatitudes or the ten commandments or the twenty-third psalm, or even the golden rule in its various versions from the world's religions, but they probably will not understand where those things came from, what they mean, why they have been considered important, or why we find it so difficult to live by their precepts. They will be like the little girl in the first church I ever served who proudly repeated the Lord's prayer each Sunday, imploring, "Lead us not into Penn Station, but deliver us from people."

Lest you conclude that I am preaching a counsel of despair, and suggesting that there is not much beyond baby-sitting we can hope to accomplish with the time available to us for religious education, let me assure you that I believe that there is much for us to teach our children on Sunday mornings. But if we are to use the time that is ours effectively, I am convinced that we must begin where the children are--taking their lives and experiences seriously, as the primary resource with which we work. Much is happening to them every day of their lives that is profoundly religious. Beginning with that fact, our goal should not be to fill their heads with information--however useful and valuable and self-affirming we have found that information. Rather our intention should be to awaken within our children a religious dimension, a religious perception of the world, of the myriad life forms which share the planet with us, and of the human venture itself. It is my conviction that the success of any religious education program is demonstrated not by how much an individual knows about religion, but rather by how equipped that individual is to see existence from a religious perspective.

Let me see if I can be a bit clearer about the point I am trying to make. I do not believe that knowing about the history of religion makes one religious. I do not believe that being able to repeat various religious classics from memory makes one religious. I do not believe that being able to identify the people on someone else's list of the ten most important religious leaders, or being able to explain some point of theological nicety makes one religious. These are intellectual pursuits which have their own rewards for those drawn to them. Religion, on the other hand, lies much closer to the heart than to the head. As someone has said, "Religion is not taught; it is caught."

In my judgment, a religious individual is one who has developed a sense of reverence and awe for this marvelous universe in which we find ourselves. A religious individual is one who perceives the necessity to live life under the guidance of a moral code which is the result of his or her own searching and is not subject to the vagaries and tyrannies of current opinion. A religious individual is one who is able to see incarnated in every human being some revelation of the sacred reality which bodied forth this universe. A religious individual is one whose value system is strong enough to sustain a life time of choices and decisions and opportunities and relationships. A religious individual is one who is able to intuit the unity which underlies the apparent diversity of existence, and who is able to feel compassion and empathy for all the suffering and all the sorrowing on this living planet. A religious individual is one who lives with a conscious sense of

gratitude for all that which dies in order that we might live, and who finds this conscious and inescapable gratitude an imperative to live life with reverence, determined to make of existence a gift for all others. A religious individual is one who searches the world of personal experience for its unique revelation of truth, and while accepting the testimony of others as a guide, is never willing to settle for a second-hand faith. A religious individual is one who can see the ultimate absurdity of existence and escape from bitterness into humor.

It is my strong conviction that the duty of any adequate program of religious education is not to try to provide young people with facts about religion so much as it is to evoke those kinds of experiences which are central to a religious life. Thus, it doesn't worry me very much if our children are not able to repeat the ten commandments at the drop of a hat; most of us couldn't either. But it will disturb me deeply if our religious education program does not challenge them to develop a code of ethics by which their lives can be lived, and in terms of which personal decisions and social policies may be judged. It doesn't worry me very much if the Lord's prayer doesn't flow smoothly off their tongues. But it will disturb me profoundly if our religious education program does not challenge them to think about the transcendent and their relationship to that which provides the larger context of their lives and sustains their on-going existence. It doesn't worry me very much if our children cannot recite the Buddha's Eight-fold path. But it will disturb me greatly if we fail to evoke a sense of urgency about the definition of the good life and what that requires of us. I find that I am not deeply distressed if our young people cannot relate the sequence of events in the legends about Moses or Jesus. But I will be deeply disturbed if our religious education does not challenge them to consider what values they would be willing to serve in their lives, and what values are so crucial to their own self-respect that life without them would lose its meaning. I find that I do not expect our children to develop a profound understanding of world religions as a result of their experience with our religious education program, but I am convinced we will have failed if we do not instill in them a deep and profound and critical reverence for other people's traditions. I find that it will not distress me if our children cannot explain who Ecclesiastes was, or how his thought relates to Greek philosophy, but it will distress me if we fail to evoke that rich sense of absurdity which caused him to write "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." In short, I do not expect our religious education program to teach our children everything they will ever want to know about religion. I do expect it to help them experience religion. I do expect it to help them lay the foundation for a religious life.

This is no easy task that I am proposing. Indeed, in many ways, it is easier to hide behind a content-centered curriculum which seeks to teach about religion. We must begin by treating the content of our curriculum as a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. The content is not itself religious, but must be judged by how well it leads the students to encounter the holy, how well it functions as a pathway toward the sacred. The real focus of the program is to be found in the lives of the children, and the interaction between the children and their teachers. Things of religious significance are happening to our children every day of their lives, just as they are happening to us every day of our lives. It is our job to lift the sacred and the holy out of the everyday reality in which it is

hidden and help our children to see the marvel, the mystery, the wonder, the magnificence, the pain, the absurdity and the joy of their world, of their own lives, of their very beings. In order to do that, we must take our children and their experiences seriously. We must listen to them, get to know them, enter into their world and invite them into ours, be prepared to be challenged by their insights and their questions and their innate wisdom.

But we must do more than that. We must be prepared to give ourselves to our children. Crucial to moral and religious development is the presence, every step of the way, of women and men who can function as models and mentors and exemplars, lest each generation find itself inventing the life-journey anew, knowing little of the struggles and achievements of those who preceded them. In religious education there is an opportunity to share the rewards and the challenges of the religious pilgrimage with young minds just beginning the journey. To do that job, we must be willing to be vulnerable, to share our own wonder and uncertainty and joy and sorrow. We must be willing to allow our children to see us as something other than experts and authorities, but as comrades on the journey. In the end, those who would teach religion have nothing to offer except their own lives, the story of their successes and failures, of their visions and dreams and how experience shaped their understanding and devotion. Our church school should be a place where those of us who have been on the road to a moral and meaningful life share our stories with those just beginning the venture. Our duty is not to teach the ancient history of another people's faith, someone else's revelation, but to open ourselves up that others may see the faith that is implicit in every breath we take, the revelation which stands before us in everything we see. Our challenge is to prepare our children not to astound Grandma and Grandpa by how much they know about religion but to celebrate the sacred in their own lives.

I began by saying that I was talking primarily about religious education for children. As I think about what I have said, it becomes increasingly clear, that for me, a program for religious growth and learning is the same for all ages. It does not center upon imparting facts. It centers upon stirring up the mind and the spirit so that we are able to confront the sacred and the holy in our own lives, so that we are challenged to conform our lives to our convictions, so that we are invited to be serious about life, but not to take ourselves too seriously. That is what I want for our children and that is what I want for myself and for everyone of us. That, in my judgment, is the goal of a program of education: to enable each of us to live a religious life.