

Message Part I—A Diversity

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson-Doyle

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Reading: From “God Is Not One” by Stephen Prothero

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Note: The sermon is an oral event. This manuscript may not reflect the exact spoken words. If you want to hear what was actually said, you can purchase a CD of the sermon in the church office or listen to the audio on our website. © Matthew Johnson-Doyle, 2011.

I took a class in college called “Conceptions of Ultimate Reality” –
it was a study of how some different religious perspectives
thought about . . . well . . . thought about . . .

see, here’s the problem.

What do you call it?

Ultimate Reality is the term often used by scholars of world religions,
but that’s sort of vague, hard to handle.

I suppose you could say “Sacred Cosmology”,
but I don’t know how much that helps.

You can’t say, “God”, that much is clear.

I took another class in college called “The Problem of God”,
and boy, I tell you, God *is* a problem.

In the Western Religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam –
God is the ultimate reality.

But in some eastern traditions, the gods are more middling characters –
So Taoism says the Tao is the source and way of things,
and the gods, if there are any, participate in the Tao,
not the other way round.

In Buddhism, the gods – if you believe in them, and many Buddhists don’t –
are subject to the wheel of samasara, of death and rebirth,

just like everything else.

So you can't say "God" is ultimate, because he/she/it/they isn't/aren't for everyone.

But we want to.

Or, more, we want to make connections between traditions.

We humans reason by analogy,
and so that's how we think of religious diversity.

Nirvana is like heaven – even though, in truth, it's totally different.

The Tao is like God – even though the Tao is a passive force, not an active individual.

And so on and so forth.

we say, all the religions are really the same –
oh, they use different words, do different rituals,
but that's just the surface.

We might be all different colors,
but under the shell,
we're all chocolate candy.
The same, really, in essential matters.

Push this metaphor, a little:
the shell, the outer color,
this color is artificial – in the case of the candy,
made with artificial colors and flavors, right?
It's not real.
The real part is inside, the coca and the milk.

This is the way we think about religion too, right?
The rituals and creeds and doctrines,
the authorities and cultures –
that's all artificial.
The real is the inside, the core, of ethical living,
humility, wonder, awe, thanksgiving.

170 years ago the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker
delivered and published an essay on

“The Transient and Permanent in Christianity”

he made exactly this argument.

He said,

Looking at the Word of Jesus, ... the pure religion he taught, nothing appears more fixed and certain. ... But, looking at the history of what men call Christianity, nothing seems more uncertain and perishable.

170 years ago, this sentiment made Parker a heretic, even among the Unitarians, who thought he had gone too far. But it is now a commonly accepted idea, and not just among us liberals.

We really want this to be true.

We want the religious differences between us to be extremely inconsequential.

We know that over human history – and to this very day, it seems like every day in the news –

we know that religious differences have been the source of war, violence, death, persecution, oppression, exile.

Every faith, the world over, has at times in its own history, had members of that faith murdered for their refusal to change their mind.

We don't like this world, and we want it to be different.

We want to say, look, these differences are artificial flavors, they aren't even real.

We're all candy, deep down.

We wish that instead of fighting over our differences, we could laugh at them, and realize that some things matter more than what we say we believe about some technical matter of doctrine.

You know, like this.

Video Clip:

<https://www.gmopensocial.googleusercontent.com/gadgets/proxy/refresh=3600&container=gm&gadget=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2Fimg%2Fmodules%2Fgm%2Fyoutube%2Fcard-youtube.xml/http://i.ytimg.com/vi/x3HuShaTNoY/default.jpg>

We want it to be like this – funny, and then reconciled.
And yet we know that people have died, in part,
because of their belief that the sacraments are a symbolic memorial,
and not a vehicle of grace.

This is what we want, and Stephen Prothero is trying to tell us that our desire
does not reality make.

Religious differences are meaningful to believers and societies,
and not everything is analogous.

I want to recommend his book, *God Is Not One*, to you for reading,
there are quality chapters on each of 8 major religious faiths,
and he makes an important and timely point
about respecting the diversity of religious paths.

Religions are not the same.

They are not all candy.

They come out of different places,
with different concerns, contexts, hopes, fears, and dreams.

Some are crunchy, some are chewy.

This doesn't mean that we can't be civil to one another,
that we can't be in dialogue with respect and decency,
but it is a fiction to say that it is all the same,
or that we would ever know what a "pure" religion was like,
for it is the forms, the habits, the cultures,
the particular stories and myths and cadences,
which give religion its power, its accessibility and resilience.

Indeed, to say that all religions are the really the same,
that all Gods are the same,
or, as my college class would put it,
all Ultimate Reality is the same,
is deeply insulting.

People cherish their differences, their ways of doing this.

I've heard many people of color say,
challenging the notion of a colorblind society,
that "if you don't see color, you don't see me."

We should make sure that color isn't a barrier to full participation,
that everyone is equal under the law,
but to respect the full person, we need to see the whole person.

Likewise, to say that religious differences don't matter at all,
is to say, I don't see your religion.
I don't respect your path.

We've had a lot of great guests here this summer to tell us about their religious path.
And there are resonances, and similarities, and points of contact
with our faith tradition.

But these paths are each different.
If I went to the Temple, and took Rabbi Wing's place,
-- even though I don't speak a word of Hebrew,
and don't know any of the rituals or prayers,
but I said to them, it's OK, all religion is the same,
well, I don't think they'd appreciate that very much.
Same goes for each of our guests this summer.

And if they took my place,
and did their thing here –
you might appreciate it for a little while,
but then you would say, wait a minute, this isn't my faith,
this isn't my tradition.
I need to hear other ideas,
I'm missing the science, or the social justice, or the welcome of skepticism, or the explicit religious
pluralism
that are the hallmarks of our tradition.
I don't know your hymns and I don't understand your prayers.

Religious differences are important to the people who hold them,
and we can learn from each other,
and respect each other,
and we can be civil with each other,
and we can best do that when everyone is free to follow their own path,
to follow their own conscience.

Well before Theodore Parker, another Unitarian set the foundation for our fundamental conviction of the value – the beauty – of religious diversity.

In 1568, the Unitarian King John Sigismund of Transylvania, issued an order that the people should get to choose their own preachers. This was the very first deceleration of religious tolerance in Europe. He said, *“in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied [unless] they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve.”*

We hold that religion should help one live a better life, and what King Sigismund understood is that it is the diversity of religious paths that makes this possible – for people are different.

They need different things.

And this difference, this diversity, is beautiful.

I love that we live in a country where religious diversity is routinely honored, where Buddhists and Pagans and Christians and everyone else can live together and, most of the time, treat each other with respect.

I don't want us all to be the same, to strip away all the history and culture and unique beauty of each tradition.

So let us, first, acknowledge that our hopes for uniformity and the absence of conflict are misplaced.

It cannot and should not be so.

Then let us give thanks, give profuse thanks, for the great wonder that there are so many paths, so many types and textures, so many ways to think and live and feel the religious life.

And let us give thanks, and give support, that this church takes it as its mission, explicitly and purposefully, to celebrate that diversity, to honor it and defend it, and to live out among us, in the religious diversity in this room, the hope that we might be not diminished, but evermore enriched,

by this many-splendored thing.

Reading: From “On Religion” by Friedrich Schleiermacher

Message Part II- A Verity

A few weeks ago, I had the chance to teach the Unitarian Universalist lay folks who attended a regional leadership school up in Beloit about Unitarian Universalist theology.

One my proudest accomplishments that week was getting them to shout “Schleiermacher” when the spirit moved them.

For Friedrich Schleiermacher is the father of liberal theology, and it was the idea that you heard in the reading today that makes liberal theology:

that, yes, there is morals, and there is metaphysics, but that’s not religion.

Religion is, instead, the intuition of the universe.

It is our feeling of awe and dependence on something so much larger than ourselves.

Despite our best efforts to redefine religion in this way, the old definition stuck,

and when we speak of religion today we speak of the whole thing altogether – our feelings of dependence, the culture, the forms, the rituals, the history, all of it.

We created a new word, or used an old word in a new – old way, to describe this feeling, this intuition of the universe, the word spirituality.

But, like words like religion and God and Ultimate Reality, spirituality has all these connotations.

We think we’ve got to get out our crystals and our sage stick.

Or that spirituality is un-rigorous, or superficial, or we think it is a luxury in world of injustice and trouble.

So maybe that’s not your word – we can call it what Schleiermacher calls it - intuition. feeling.

a sense that we are in something so much more than us,

but yet our own limited selves
are part of this,
the finite exists in the infinite –
that we are, in fact, made of and return to the stars,
that all is interdependent –
and physics and science teaches us now that this is true,
that our intuition of oneness is accurate.

So this is my answer to Prothero's book and idea: that God is not One.

I agree, so far as it goes,
that religions are diverse,
that we should value our diversity,
that the differences between religious paths are important and real,
and that you can't just say it's all really, deep down, the same.

But there is something that is the same:

the feeling.

the intuition.

these things are the same –
the very minute we start to put words to it, or describe it,
even just to ourselves,
then we are in the realm of culture and particularity and difference,
but that initial feeling,
that sense of WOW,
that is universal.
The feeling of a still small voice, quenching our tears and calming our fears.

I hear singing in the air – that's the feeling, that's universal
there must be a god somewhere – well, maybe and maybe not.
That's a particular theological claim,
a reflection on our feeling,
but the feeling that starts it out,
that's in our body,
that's part of being human,
that's something for everyone.

I had a seminary professor who speculated that the Hebrew word for God –
Y H W H, what is sometimes pronounced Yahwah,
originally this word was simply something like “Yahoo!”
the sound of exhilaration, of amazement, of more-than-ness,
which happens to us when we stand under the night sky,
or when we hold the hand of a newborn babe,
or a dying elder,
the feeling of justice-makers and lovers and friends
who feel that tingle in their skin
when all that divides begins to merge.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Sorry, the link for this clip is unavailable.

God is between us – and nobody represents God.
Another way of saying that is that no one owns the feeling of dependence,
no one controls the intuition of the infinite,
and this feeling of connection,
across the supposed empty space,
is where we feel the holy and powerful.

And if we can say that, clearly and with love,
then we can grasp with our heart the way that we are all one,
and yet celebrate and appreciate the great diversity between us.

Just as an aside, or a point to make,
the guy in the middle of that clip,
who speaks so confidently about what God has worked into the fabric of existence –
that’s not the feeling,
that’s what Schleiermacher calls “empty mythology.”

I thought about cutting him out,
but then I thought I could use it as example.

And it’s easy, isn’t it,
to jump from this feeling of connection and greatness,
to analysis and description,

for us to start thinking and talking about what it means.

What I urge for us, then, is to pause for a moment,
right in that space –
that empty space between –
and just be, just be there,
where all people can be one,
where all life can be one,
where all is one,
before we know what it means or what to call it.

Over the summer, our guests were asked a similar set of questions –
and most of them were asked the same question as a closer:

If you could invite us to be part of one moment in your religious life – one ritual, place, or activity that
would both tell us about your faith and itself be a moment of beauty, what would that be?

I thought the answers that I heard were just beautiful.
To visit the graves of the prophets of Baha'i, on a mountain top
in the near east,
to stand next to a bonfire on mid-summer's night,
to sit at a family table for a Passover Seder and hear to old stories told again.
Each tradition has places like this,
times like this,
contexts in which one is likely to feel that intuition of all,
that connection with others.

What about us?

If we had to answer that question, what would we say?

I imagine us Unitarians, as is our wont,
would give many different answers to that question.

I can think of many such moments –
moments that teach us about our faith and are themselves moments of beauty –
including this one:

us, rising in body and in spirit,
singing together,
our voices joining, our hands joining,
across our diversities and our particularities –

even our peculiarities, even across our arguments –
this moment, when we are together,

it is for me a sacrament –
a visible sign in the world
of what is invisible, infinite, and beyond all words and names,
what can be felt – by every person –
so let us rise, and let us sing.