



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Religion and Spirituality: Friend or Foe”

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### Centering Thoughts

*A religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. ‘Religion,’ Wikipedia*

*Religion consists in a set of things which the average man thinks he believes and wishes he was certain of. Mark Twain*

*I cannot see how a man of any large degree of humorous perception can ever be religious— unless he purposely shuts the eyes of his mind and keeps them shut by force. Mark Twain*

### Sermon

“I’m not really religious; I’m actually spiritual.”

There are two basic and related assumptions behind this statement:

Religion: bad, outdated, superstitious, irrelevant, expensive;

Spiritual: good, a la mode, rational, important, and best of all: free

Religion **is** dangerous: you can get caught and exposed. You can be judged inadequate. Spirituality is safe. No one agrees on what it is never mind whether or not one might be called to account for it in some way.

The temptation to value vague spirituality over concrete religion has a very long history. Most of us here are heirs to one version or another of a Cromwellian distrust of the physical body. As a native of Boston it is my unhappy inheritance that Christmas was illegal for a good part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in my home town. Puritanism is the omnipresent shade of most western religious understanding. It turns out the demagogues are right: there is a war on Christmas and it had a major victory in Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edward’s New England after 1640.

Here are some anecdotes all based on real people:

My grandson Ben became a vegetarian when he was seven. He is still a vegetarian at age 14. He confessed to me several years ago that “he lets his family go the barbeque joint.” He also allowed as how he really, really, really likes barbeque. His reasons for vegetarianism are animarian. He

loves animals and doesn't want to eat them. He cannot prevent his parents and brothers from eating barbeque.

They go anyway and invite him to come along and are extremely patient and accommodating to his religious convictions and carefully arrange for him to eat alternative menus whenever they scarf down on Wilbur, Bambi or Flipper. All of my grandsons are very smart. Ben's parents make him go to church which recently became more appealing when he met a young lady in the youth group . . .

A graduate of UGA School of Law loves football. She pays thousands of dollars over market price for home season tickets and drives or flies to all away games in foreign cities like Atlanta. While she lives in D.C. she owns a \$450,000 game-day condo in Athens furnished in various shades of red and black with hand-painted bulldogs for furniture. She is a confessed agnostic.

A family from the Midwest owns one of those truck-bed campers that lives jacked up in the back yard in South Bend 50 weeks a year. Every July they back the pickup under the camper and take off for the Upper Peninsula in Michigan to their favorite campsite for two weeks. In the camper are drawers numbered 1-14. Each of these drawers contains the food for the day of the week the number represents. The menus are the same every year in the same order! They see people just like themselves every year. Every year is virtually the same as the preceding year. They go to the funerals and weddings of their fellow truck-bed campers.

A world famous exercise guru who makes videos and writes books about exercise regimes and diet appears regularly in the media. Always gaunt and haunted looking he extols exercise, low-fat, low carbohydrate, salt-free, pepper-free, taste-free eating. He demonstrates how to take the green meat out of celery stalks so only the strings remain. Then he processes them in a blender with distilled water and drinks it. He looks vaguely unhealthy and very unhappy. He drops dead at 57. No one has ever asked him about his religion because he never ran for public office. The only running he does is around in circles on the track.

A young couple is looking for a new house on a TV show. They are looking for a home, a place of solace, rest and safety that will keep all their demons in a locked box somewhere else. The colors have to match and not be red. The house cannot be on a cul-de-sac nor have numbers with 6's in them or a 13<sup>th</sup> floor. The Feng shui guru has to certify the house before any inspector looks for termites, floor rot or a leaking roof. An open floor plan is a must so their guests will immediately notice the wine cooler and fail to detect the high-end appliances behind their decorator facades. Of course I'm messing here. For one thing it is fun and makes my days shorter. Perhaps more to the point I am trying to expose what I perceive to be a widespread misperception of both religion and spirituality. I would submit that all of these stories portray profoundly religious people. Their religions have no discernable relationship to the kind of activity usually associated with that contemptible phenomenon: organized religion. Yet they are very organized and very religious. I would even submit further that these religions are pretty successful in a limited sort of way as we'll see later.

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As modern Americans we have been subjected to a full-fledged assault on religion by literature and other media. Have you ever seen a movie where a religious leader such as a clergy person is ever portrayed as a heroine?

All religious leaders are knaves, charlatans, perverts, and totally corrupt imposters. When religious motives are ascribed to anyone they are virtually always Exhibit A for superstition of the most deluded and creepy kind.

Spirituality is harder to portray in movies because no one knows what it is. So Hollywood makes up a fake spiritualistic religion featuring charismatic predators on nubile females. Even spirituality is discounted and tainted with the horrible specter of religion.

We can always turn to the prophet Mark Twain for relief.

“Man is a Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion—several of them.”

“Irreverence is another person’s disrespect for your god; there isn’t any word that tells what your disrespect for his god is.”

“Faith is believing something you know ain’t true.”

“Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in.”

I’m suggesting here that most of us consciously or otherwise worship at Mr. Samuel Langhorne Clemens’ shrine. You may have noticed that he satirizes the temptation to be cynical about someone else’s religious impulses rather than our own.

We may be ingenuous about these things, but we are smart enough not to gore our own oxen. That is why we have sermons like this one.

If it is true that good old God is dead, you know the fabled God concocted out of selective reading of the bible, TV-preacher-watching and feeble imagination, then we should no longer try to insist on a definition of religion which includes supernatural power. It is simply fruitless to stick pins in a God very few people actually take seriously especially those of us whose favorite indoor sport is sneering at other people’s religion whilst remaining unconscious of our own.

I sorted through several attempts at defining religion on Wikipedia. This one got closer than most. “A *religion* is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence.” I would submit that this is what we would like religion to be for somebody else. For most modern people this is just too much work.

To take into account what people actually do and think instead of just fantasize about I would change the definition to something like this:

“*Religion* is an eclectic amalgam of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that people use to deal with their experience of the randomness of life.” After all, if you were rich wouldn’t you want

to practice voodoo economics otherwise known as the trickle-down theory? Trickle down works great for the people with a hand on the tap.

Religion is less about what people believe than how they seek to understand who they are and how they fit into the human condition. We use labels to prove that we fit in somewhere! Some of the labels come pre-issued such as gender, skin-color, geographical origin. We get to say "I'm Italian." Or "I am a girl". Others labels we have more choice in such as "I'm a football player" or "I'm an extrovert" or "I'm a gardener". Other labels are harder to pin down "I'm Catholic" or "I'm a liberal".

A lot of us have had the experience of moving away from our tribal origins. After some time in the new South we learn to distinguish the nuances applied to the label "Yankee". All of them are opprobrious, but some are venomous.

Even as the NY Times reports that more Americans than ever give themselves the religious label of "None" I would like to suggest that we are just as religious as ever, perhaps even more so since we are so god-awful unconscious about the religions we do have.

In our time, religion fits under the general category of "Lifestyle". When people apply labels to themselves they are adopting lifestyle labels. Remember the labels don't have to be true or accurate. They are ours; we own 'em and claim 'em and who are you or anyone else to say different. It is my style. In previous generations it was called taste. Now taste is optional.

Our styles are reinforced through choices we make on our computers: "My music" "My videos" "My crap". This little essay is typed in "Normal style". Of course I get to define what "Normal" is! In home buying we say "modern isn't my style"; in mate choosing "You are not my type." "This is my personal style" says the 18 year old as she gets a snake tattoo around her neck for you know, like, for-evurrrr.

Contemporary research summarized in the "Atlantic Magazine" says that what we claim as values or beliefs are more often than not at odds with our behavior. Ethicists lie and steal, police personnel speed like crazy. People who are opposed to abortion love capital punishment and vice versa! The hardest form of religion is one which requires consistency. That is why all of the really rigorous religions are so small and getting smaller. The best ones have only one member.

This is why some of us practice religion. Me, I have several religions. I am a Christian. My brand was once referred to by a cynic commenting on his friend's recent conversion to Anglican Christianity. "If you have to go into that sort of thing at least you picked a fairly benign form of it." I practice Christianity partly through my membership in this fellowship. I practice. Sometimes I get close.

I practice music. It is definitely a religion. It is also a spiritual practice. I avoid sports of any sort in any form out of a religious conviction that organized sports are a dominant culture way of controlling the masses. Avoiding sports or even talking about s\*\*\*\*\* is a religion and a spiritual practice. Avoiding banks and bankers falls into the same category.

I make stuff out of raw wood. I practice woodworking. Virtually everything I make I give away. Sometimes I get the cost of the materials, but usually not. Woodworking is religion and spiritual practice. I used to practice clarinet and organ and piano. I don't anymore. I gave up those religions and practices mostly because I am terrible at them. I used to practice dog training. That cult died with the dog. I now practice doglessness. It is a good religion and doubtful spiritual practice. I've actually gotten good at 12 step religion and practice by doing it the modern way—my way.

What I conclude about all this from my own experience is that religion is a way to practice ways of being in the world which provides a narrative that helps us in out of the dark. A lot of what we want to know, we'll never know. Many of the things we used to be sure about we are not so well, definite about now except for those of us who stopped developing when we were 12.

Much of our reflection on what we experience as real life would convince a distant observer that life is too crazy to be tolerated. Enter religion: lifestyle, belief system, and superstition, historical practice, with or without the supernatural. We are all religious. Some of us combine our religions with trans dimensional activity which we summarize as spirituality. There are many bad religions and a lot of cheap spirituality. That does not make one better than the other. Practice that is bad or cheap is, well, bad and sometimes cheap too.

Me I look for the holy wherever I can find it. Sometimes it is very hard to see. But I keep listening for the notes, look for the color in the grain of the wood, and intuit the life of the redeemer who lives within me.

Oh, by the way, my doctor **practices** medicine. So far so good!

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. Other than minimal self-care (eating, sleeping, bathing) what do I do religiously? Are any of them spiritual? Are any of them a religion?
2. What things that I believe make a difference in my daily life? Do any of them help me with the fear that nothing makes sense?
3. What religions have I given up? Have I taken up any new ones? Am I willing to say to someone else why my religion matters to me?