

"Why Do We Do What We Do?"
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION

As many of you know, I work to keep up with trends in American religion. I see it as part of my job as Senior Minister here at First Unitarian Society to keep up with trends because FUS is both a venerable institution as the first humanist congregation in the US and a cutting-edge institution as the largest Humanist congregation in the nation.

In my reading, I recently ran into the term "micro-religion." As soon as I read the word, it struck me that the future of religion in an individualistic nation such as the United States is almost certainly "micro."? After all, religions and philosophies here in the US have nearly always focused on personal search and growth.

The Catholic News Agency reports that there were 1,600 different Christian denominations in the world in the year 1900. Sixteen hundred denominations.

Today, there are 45,000 different flavors of Christianity in our world, and the Catholic News Agency projects there will be 70,000 different Christian denominations by 2050. The number of flavors of Christianity goes up, even as the percentage of the population who are Christian goes down.

Micro-religion.

"Mainline denominations—such as the Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, the United Church of Christ—lose a total of a million members in a typical year.

Unitarian Universalism is not considered mainline, but we're shrinking as well. According to UUA.org, we lost 655 members nationwide from 2015 to 2016, down to a total just shy of 155,000. This is roughly the number of UU s in 1961, while the US population has gone up dramatically.

But what about Humanism?

Trends toward a more secular future for the United States are clear: 48% of Millennials (those born between 1984-2002)—48%—are what is termed “post-Christian.” That is, they are secular in their basic view of the world and are not looking to traditional organized religion for meaning and purpose in their lives.

A recent Pew poll indicates that 28% of Democrats and 19% of Republicans are secular, claiming no religious affiliation at all—the “nones.” Among Democrats, that 28% outnumbers the next largest group, Catholics, at 21%.

As many of you know, FUS is working with Chris Stedman on the idea of a Humanist Center of Minnesota, and this year Chris has been working with grad students at Augsburg, surveying the religiously unaffiliated born after 1984. Who are they and what do they want?

Because “secular” does not mean “humanist.” The values and commitments of Humanism set a high standard for cooperative and communal human behavior. These values are programmed into most of us by natural selection, but they aren’t always—or perhaps even often—the easiest path.

As I look over the charred and burning religious landscape, I ask some questions:

If not in organized religion, where are—or even are people finding—meaning and purpose?

A second question: In the rapid fragmentation of religion into do-it-yourself consumerism, when does “personal” become solipsistic? In other words, when does the path to meaning and purpose lead only to gazing in wonder at your own navel?

What does a concept such as “religion” even mean? We throw it around knowingly, but what is it, really?

And, what does an explicitly humanist congregation such as this one add to lives?

This week I’m going to look at the personal implications on our fragmenting religious landscape. On February 4 I’m going to talk about “Congregating and Aggregating,” looking at the congregation as an aggregator for action.

ONE

Not bad as a focusing questions is: What the heck is "religion" anyway?

In your order of service this morning is a quotation from William James, who wrote the classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James had an uncanny ability to boil religious ideas down to their essences. James wrote,

The warring gods and formulas of the various religions do indeed cancel each other, but there is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts: –

1. An uneasiness; and
2. Its solution.

He went on to write:

1. The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand.
2. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers. (Lecture XX, "Conclusions")

Though James was working from a Western way of processing knowledge, as do I, I think with a little tweaking, this way of seeing religion is useful aside from the Western monotheisms.

1. We perceive that there is something wrong with us as we are;—on many days many of us are a hot mess.
2. We know somehow within ourselves that a proper connection to reality will save us from this "something wrong" and reduce the amount of time we feel like a hot mess.

At least in my understanding, Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Hinduism and a host of other religions work this way as well.

Now, the question is, Why do we human beings perceive of ourselves as "wrong"? I'm not talking about being told you are less than. I'm talking about what could be called the "religious intuition."

Don't cats and dogs, for example, at least appear to see themselves as perfectly good cats and dogs.

My guess is that we human beings have the ability to abstractly consider the fact that we are aging and will die, as will everyone and everything we love. I think this is the most basic of "what's wrong." Not necessarily a fear of death, but the knowledge that we will cease to exist, as will all we love, and, eventually, the universe as we know it.

This is well summed up in the Flaming Lips song "Do You Realize": "Do you realize that everyone you know someday will die?" The solution to this "wrong" according to the Flaming Lips?

And instead of saying all of your goodbyes
Let them know you realize that life goes fast

The Flaming Lips way of dealing with the "wrong" of life is very Humanist. It is about seeing reality for what it is:

You realize the sun doesn't go down
It's just an illusion caused by the world spinning round

The atheist poet Wallace Stevens dealt with the question "Do you realize that everyone you know someday will die?" by turning the problem on its head. He wrote this:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
So evenings die, in their green going,
A wave, interminably flowing.
So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
The cowl of winter, done repenting.

We are, in other words, part of the flow of nature that goes on and on (at least for a few billion years), despite our individual expiration date.

In the classic mapping of what religion or spirituality provide, there are three main points in escaping that feeling that something is wrong:

1. A sense of connection with what is (be that god, nature, world, universe, cosmos).
2. A sense of being part of something larger than yourself.
3. A sense of meaning and purpose.

These feelings arise in contexts ranging from the huge, mystical experiences of utter boundlessness and complete connection to all that is, down to a general feeling of contentment with being alive and doing what you're doing.

I agree with the Flaming Lips and Wallace Stevens in speculating that the biggest "something wrong" for human beings is that we ourselves and everyone and everything we love is mortal.

We can deal with this fact in one of two ways: we can deny it, believing that there is eternal life somewhere; or we can accept the way that reality appears to be:

And instead of saying all of your goodbyes
Let them know you realize that life goes fast

And

So evenings die, in their green going,
A wave, interminably flowing.

Cats and dogs appear to know that all this decay and growth and change is just fine . .
..

TWO

Clearly, part of the fragmentation on the American religious landscape has to do with the dissemination of knowledge. Just as Gutenberg's printing press caused the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s by rapidly distributing books that at one time would've been the exclusive property of the elite, so now the internet rapidly disseminates information without the filters of professionals who once were considered experts.

For example, and speaking of religions, Sweden has just recognized a brand new religion, called Kopimism. K-o-p-i-m-i-s-m. (You can look it up if you have a bio-external extended mind device with you.) Kopimism uses the catchphrase "All knowledge to all." That's a sentiment most of us can get behind!

Kopimism is not only an example of the sort of religion that can be invented and propagated by the internet, but it is actually about the internet.

The claims of Kopimism are these:

- * The search for knowledge is sacred
- * The circulation of knowledge is sacred
- * The act of copying is sacred.

The sacred symbol for Kopimism is the old yin-yang symbol, with the addition on one side of "control-C" (copy) and on the other of "control-V" (paste).

Kopimism is certainly a sign of the times, though I suspect it won't be the next Big Thing. Kopimism does exhibit a couple of things about why religion is becoming more and more fragmented. One is increasing knowledge; the other is the consumer edge that permeates thinking in the Western World.

After all, Capitalism is based on the assumption of the inviolability of the individual who is free to consume. In Unitarian Universalism we say "the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

Even though I think that all human religions spring from some basic human psychology, Eastern and Western religions view the individual very differently. To put the matter a bit too simply, some religions tell us that we are A-OK as individuals, and others tell us to get over ourselves.

In classic Christianity, it's you and God. Get right with God and you get eternal life. But that vision of eternal life is about individuals: in the great by-and-by, the circle will be unbroken and you'll get to sing with grandma in the heavenly choir. Perhaps even your beloved dogs and cats who have passed will be there.

I'm not making light: this is a grand vision. But it is in its essence about me, me, me. *My* eternal life.

I think that one reason Western religions are fragmenting into endless subgroups is just this consumerist, subjective individualism: I get to choose the religion that's right for me, or I get to construct one that makes sense, pulling this bit from Christianity, that bit from Buddhism, and on and on.

Other religious traditions, however—and this includes Humanism—stress that getting over ourselves and serving others is the way out of feeling like a hot mess. (That's why we have a Hands-On Humanism award at FUS!)

As I said earlier, the values and commitments of Humanism set a high standard for cooperative and communal human behavior. These values are programmed into most of us by natural selection, but they aren't always—or perhaps even often—the easiest path. We've got to pick up our hot-mess selves and get into community in order to get over ourselves.

And our acceptance that the beauty of life is also its tragedy underwrites what we do:

And instead of saying all of your goodbyes
Let them know you realize that life goes fast

CONCLUSION

To sum it up, that's where I see Humanism and this congregation mattering. For me, "religion" is about discerning and understanding how we human beings developed and function and how the world and the cosmos developed and functions.

Albert Einstein put it well:

I am a deeply religious non-believer. This is a somewhat new religion. If something is in me which can be called religious, then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world . . .

Science is probably the best way for Westerners to learn that it's not all about me, me, me and my navel. "*I am because we are.*"

A cat can be a fine cat alone, but how can I practice being human all by myself? Human beings are social, tribal animals.

We *need* to congregate and interact in meaningful ways.

Yes, personal reflection and growth is important, and congregations in the future will continue to be about the personal search for truth and meaning. But more importantly they will be about *community*, communities where generations, social classes, and human beings in all our rich variety will gather to get over ourselves and get on with being more fully human.

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