

Congregating and Aggregating: Religion as an Organizational Force
a talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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Introduction

A couple of weeks ago I talked about the rapidly fragmenting landscape of religion. For that talk, I asked a basic question: What the heck is "religion" anyway?

What one discovers fairly quickly in digging down a bit is that religion isn't as easy to define as it at first might appear.

One concise answer I used a couple of weeks ago comes from William James, who opined that religion is

1. An uneasiness; and
2. Its solution. (Lecture XX, "Conclusions")

Notice that James is looking at the *personal* in religion: what goes on in the human mind.

Another way of defining religion is the way Dr. Lofton at Yale Divinity School defines it: "religion is a word for how people consciously organize themselves in the world and unconsciously are organized by the world." Notice that this is about the *public and communal* in religion.

An idea that came up as I discussed the concept of religion with some of you at social hour a couple of weeks ago originates with the religion scholar Reza Aslan, who is very clear about what religion is: Nobody knows!

Aslan is willing to take a stab at a one-word definition, however, and that word is not "god" or "morality" or "love" but "identity." Notice that this is about the *public* in religion.

These are the ideas I want to throw into a sack and shake a little bit on this Super Bowl Sunday, as the city of Minneapolis roils with the bustle of hundreds of thousands of fans. After all, it's difficult *not* to see this yearly American ritual as mass religion.

What are we saying when we say the word *religion*? And what do we think we are *doing* when we do religion?

One

First, let's consider the insight that Dr. John Dietrich brought to this congregation when he was called here back in 1916. Dietrich imagined an American Protestant-style religious gathering that could be done without reference to a god or traditional religious trappings such as scriptures or religious language. Secular poetry and secular music, Dietrich thought, would do just as well.

Out of this insight, Dietrich and the people of this congregation created what they called "religious humanism," what today I like to call "congregational humanism."

One-hundred-and-one-years of weekly gatherings have proven that the model works. And today, UU ministers, Ethical Culture Leaders, and Humanist Celebrants across the nation serve the life-passage needs of people who identify with no religion.

But there is a problem with that model: Remind yourself: when John Dietrich arrived here in 1916, most everyone in the city belonged to a congregation. What Dietrich and his partner in Humanism, Curtis Reese, thought they were doing was placing a time bomb under Christian dogma but keeping the idea of congregations. They thought that science and critical thinking and technology and democracy would destroy ideas that they considered to be old fashioned—such ideas as a god who is like a European king; such ideas as praying rather than rolling up our sleeves and getting to work; such ideas as passivity in the face of government, economics, superstition, and the human condition in general.

A century and more have shown that they were only partially correct in their assumptions. What blew up was not superstition or the human need for the spiritual. Rather, it was the social binding that religion offered that went to pieces over the decades.

The telephone. The automobile. The radio. Then television. Then the internet. Since 1916, the physical bodies and brains of our species have evolved in the slow, halting pace that they always have. But our technology . . . that evolved at break-neck speed.

In the century of Humanism, capitalism went from a system severely questioned by the Russian Revolution and then the economic collapse of the Great Depression, to the only game in town for most human beings living on our planet.

Things have changed, and our thinking about what religion means must change as well.

Two

The reading this morning is from Dr. Kathryn Lofton, Professor of Religious Studies, American Studies, and History and Divinity at Yale University where she also serves as Deputy Dean of Diversity.

In her latest book, called *Consuming Religion*, Dr. Lofton writes, "First, nobody evades being organized by something; second, if you're being organized by something, it is worth learning the terms for that organization; third, if you learn (points) one and two, you will be a part of the study of religion."

Notice that this definition addresses both private and public aspects of the human religious impulse. This is the idea I want to explore today: the organizing principal of religion. What Dr. Reza Aslan calls "identity."

As we heard in the reading, Dr. Lofton believes that organization is the essence of religion. The question is *what* is organizing us and how aware we are of what is organizing us.

Lofton argues that we are looking at the wrong thing about religion when we look for traditional religious trappings, such as a search for the sacred. Lofton argues that religion is, at its base, an organizing principle, and any and all organizing principles should be considered religions.

We call football a religion. We call political parties religions. We call capitalism a religion. Cooking. Birding. The employees at Goldman Sachs call the corporate culture at Goldman Sachs a religion.

Again, Lofton is making a bold claim: *Anything* that organizes—either psychically or socially—is religion.

Clearly, we can't escape being organized by various forces, but what we *can* do is be conscious of the *power* of organization and use it rather than be used *by* it.

Actually, this insight is one that Unitarians have embraced at one level for quite some time. In the mid-nineteenth century, Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau claimed that nature itself is sacred and therefore walking in the woods is as sacred an act as going to church . . . perhaps even more so, because nature encourages us to question human social assumptions.

The Humanist insight is that even if there is a god, that god is unlikely to have anything to do with human problems or human actions. Therefore, meaning and purpose and moral action are all human constructs, in the hands of the human collective: all ordering is human ordering. Therefore, we humans have the freedom to rethink all social norms and assumptions.

This insight led the first generation of Humanists to Democratic Socialism during the Great Depression of the 1930s, because they insisted that human beings create economies and consequently human actions create inequality. The social order is a human order. The First Humanist Manifesto in 1933 insisted on a "shared life" for all people, in a "shared world."

Since the Cold War, mainstream economic theory has insisted that only market capitalism can create the sorts of societies in which economic opportunity and liberal social policy can exist—the inviolability of individual choice. *Neoliberalism* is the term *that* has emerged as the label for this set of assumptions as to the proper ordering of reality.

Let's face it: most American citizens have no real choice in their economic circumstance. In the neoliberal scenario, part of the collateral damage of free market capitalism is that most people lead lives of economic desperation.

Many Americans love the fact that we can choose *which* video game to play or *which* television series to binge watch, but these same Americans do not consider whether or not to go deeply into debt: going into debt is a given. Being a consumer and servicing debt are the ordering for the lives of most of us. Our religion, Dr. Lofton claims.

Remember her words: “. . . nobody evades being organized by something . . . ”

It's a good question to ponder: What is organizing *you*? What is your religion, really?

Economics? Politics? Social class? Education? Race? Gender? Age? Health? Probably a whole array of these things and more! The act of *looking* at what is organizing you . . . is religion . . .

I like that definition of religion. Religion becomes an act of *meta*–looking at our lives from a very different angle. Dr. Lofton encourages each of us to engage in the ultimate religious question: What is the order of the order you have chosen to order your life?

And are you choosing that order or is it being chosen for you?

Is that order inevitable?

Keep asking. That's religion.

Dr. Lofton goes on to say,

Where our social and ritual interests are placed now is not in denominational tradition but workplace culture; not in inherited objects but recently purchased goods; not archaic icons but an endlessly rotating cast of minor and major celebrities.

Ordering. Identity.

John Dietrich and Curtis Reese, the two horsemen of the Humanist apocalypse in the early twentieth century, did not foresee that congregational affiliation would become as easily changeable as tennis shoes and just as easily discarded.

Dietrich remained here as minister for 22 years—that's commitment to the congregational model. Curtis Reese, however, soon left congregational ministry. Reese became the first president of the American Humanist Association in 1941. The AHA has been a secular alternative to religious gatherings all these years.

In terms of the ability of religions to adapt and innovate, Humanism was *born* as an adaption.

Ordering. Identity.

As Second Wave feminists said long ago, “the personal is political.” The political is also personal. How our society will shape and order your existence can be deadly—from racism to fat shaming; from heteronormativity to position and wealth, none of us is ever free from the social forces that seek to order our lives.

One thing congregations can do, better than any other place, is put those ordering social assumptions under interrogation. That’s the first reason to congregate: to gather with other human beings, because that is how we human beings have evolved—in groups.

As I’ve mentioned before; it’s amazing, but the largest donors to our capital campaign and our largest yearly pledgers here at FUS insist upon being anonymous. That’s countercultural for real in a nation where money and social class determine everything from where you live to what you eat to how long you live.

That Humanist insight that we choose how we get ordered works . . .

Three

What else does this congregation do for those who congregate here?

We’ve talked before about how John Dietrich claimed that Humanists don’t need pastoral care—he thought Humanists can work through life’s problems on our own (again that personal aspect of religion). From one angle, that’s just silly to say. From another, it makes sense.

Fact is, Humanists don’t tend to go to their religious leaders for the same reasons that many traditional religions do.

Humanists just aren’t likely to go to a preacher and ask, “Why did god do this?” Most Humanists don’t think there’s a god that does much of anything.

“Why did god send the tsunami?” He didn’t.

“Why did god give me cancer?” He didn’t.

Those “why” conversations are fairly short among Humanists.

People like to build on oceanfronts in the Pacific. Oceanfronts in the Pacific occasionally get hit with tsunamis. Whether or not you or a loved one or an acquaintance happens to be on a Pacific beachfront when a tsunami hits is complete happenstance.

These are easy conversations for Humanists. We know that, as Bill Nye the Science Guy is fond of putting it, everything happens for a reason, and that reason is usually physics.

But that doesn't mean that pastoral care isn't important in a primarily Humanist congregation. It's just that the questions are different.

For example, the grief process is an evolved feature of the human psyche. We Humanists know that. We all know that natural disasters hit; that people suffer and die in all kinds of ways, sometimes tragically, sometimes because organic life necessarily has an expiration date.

Knowing that suffering and death are natural and inevitable parts of life doesn't mean they don't hurt.

We have a grief group here not because we are attempting to explain away grief or convince ourselves that our loved ones are in a better place, but because it helps to think about it and talk about our grief. That's the personal . . .

Conclusion

Humanism is the Swiss Army Knife of religious thought because the principles of Humanism are very straightforward:

1. The universe is flying apart at an accelerating rate; therefore, change is the only constant.
2. Human beings have created the ideas of meaning and purpose, and therefore, each of us must create meaning and purpose for ourselves.
3. The bottom line is that we evolved as communal animals, and therefore we need each other and we need to have each other's back.

That's about it.

Kathryn Lofton says,

I want scholars, thinkers, students, and citizens to imagine what work they might make religion do for them to organize the world other than how it has been organized.

Yes, that's it. From the personal to the public, we congregate to aggregate our human power. From the personal to the political, "I am because we are."

And "we are" because we interrogate the choices we are making and the choices that are making us..

SOURCES

Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion (Class 200: New Studies in Religion)*

An interview with Kathryn Lofton:

<http://religiondispatches.org/you-are-being-organized-by-something-10-questions-for-kathryn-lofton-on-consuming-religion/>