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-- Yes, But Is It Religion? --

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Across the (now rather many) years that I have been a Unitarian minister, I have been made aware, time and again, that Unitarians are not necessarily held in high repute. Not that we are held to be viciously wicked, or totally lacking in ethical outlook. We may indeed be acknowledged to be somewhat decent neighbors and rather upright citizens. But because we are not in what is conceived to be some right religious groove, we are not beyond being looked upon as questionable characters, beyond full approval, even subject to harsh disfavor. On (far) more than one occasion, I have done marriage and funeral services, and because I have not uttered the usual, expected phraseology, I have had the kick-back of being told that a particular service in and of itself was well intended, but that it had nothing to do with religion, and therefore was quite inadequate. And I have lived these many years as a Unitarian minister with the commonly repeated charge that the Unitarian church is no church at all, and that I, wittingly or unwittingly, am doing the work of the devil in luring people into the dark emptiness of irreligion. As a minister, I long ago learned to live with this kind of thing with a degree of philosophical detachment and sociological curiosity, and (some what may) I am not likely to change my ways and my views just in order to curry social approval.

Others however, (new to this Unitarian Society or perhaps desirous of joining it and knowing the disapproval of relatives and sensing the dissatisfaction of others, may have very prickling reservations, and I am not beyond having considerable sympathetic understanding of their situation and if they should leave or not join because of that situation I would in no way be condemnatory of their action) may be more bothered about the matter than I am.

But having said this, I would like on this first Sunday of another church

year to say something about the subject of religion. I do so with no apologetic plea on behalf of Unitarianism being accepted as a religion, but simply as an individual somewhat curious about the nature of religion.

Some time ago "The Society For The Scientific Study of Religion" - a society made up of outstanding scholars in various fields - began publication of a journal, and of particular note in the first issues of this journal was the very real difficulty of agreeing on a definition of religion and staking out the area of appropriate study. What is religion and how far does it extend? The usual answer, and one still reiterated in most dictionaries, emphasizes the centrality of God-belief, and thereby limits the range of religion to those who have such a belief. But this, it is agreed, is a most insular point of view which fails to include much else that might rightly be considered to be religion. There are first of all a considerable number of movements in which there is no centrality of a God-belief, in which there is no worship of a god, and in which there is no belief that the world was divinely created. Such has been Jainism, which arose in India back in the sixth century B.C. Underlying Jain doctrine is the belief that everything in the universe is eternal. There was no beginning and there is no ending. Spirits go through successive incarnations, and it is up to each individual to make his own destiny and to achieve his own redemption. There are gods - that is to say spiritual beings higher than man in various degrees, but praying to them is useless. They cannot interfere with the lives of men. Even at a higher level, they are in the same case as man; they too are responsible for their own fates and have to work out their own salvation. To be attained, if possible, is Nirvana, a state wherein the spirit is freed from all that is material and knows perfect knowledge and bliss. Revered are the 24 Tirthankaras, who are held to have been the great original saints of the movement, but they are revered as men, and not

as saviors, who most fully exemplified "the broadfording place of virtue." The situation was very much the same with Buddhism, particularly in its early centuries of development, and a non-centrality of God-belief was even more pronounced in Confucianism which was squarely centered in the here and now and provided a system of ethical precepts for individual and social behavior. Such positions have had millions and millions of adherents who have found therein orientation and motivation. By their adherents these have been considered to be religious in as much a degree as Judaism and Christianity have been held to be religions by their adherents. An interpretation of religion based on centrality of God-belief, as largely derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition is held by virtually all scholars of religion to be inadequate for a comprehension of the sweep and nature of religion.

Again the equating of religion with belief in God and worship of God is at most a catch-phrase of exclusive simplicity, which immediately begins to fall apart when we extend our view and delve into various major ways of conceiving of god. Throughout the history of mankind there have been countless gods - and even goddesses. Yet throughout the sweep of history, virtually all of these have been cast aside, divested of assumed reality, relegated to the realm of myth and legend. Today most men put no credence in them, scarcely even think of them, and most certainly don't worship them. The matter was never allowed to rest with simply any form of worship of any kind of god. Introduced into the situation was a heightened sense of ethical criticism, which most pointedly in Judaism not only replaced the many tribal gods with the concept of one God - the God of all creation - but attributed to that god qualities of and demands for justice and mercy, peace and love. Judaism, which may be credited with being the fountain-head of monotheism, has ever since retained in its main tradition, a belief in God, and thus is readily

acknowledged to be a religion, but not to be forgotten is the fact that its major consideration has been and still remains that of ethical concern.

The God-concept in and of itself provides very little in the way of a common denominator between say Judaism and many of the Christian bodies. In Roman Catholicism, as in various other Christian bodies, there is belief in a triune God which is a far departure from the monotheism of Judaism. Involved in the triune God is a deified Jesus, something that Judaism does not accept. And involved is a concentration on such doctrines as original sin, and vicarious salvation, and personal immortality, all of which are decidedly alien to Judaism. In terms of belief the contrasts between Judaism and Roman Catholicism are so many and so great that they barely fall together under the category of religion through the criterion of both having a belief in God. And the matter is very much the same, as it extends throughout the many denominational varieties of Christianity. The split into many denominations, involved a difference of opinion, in many instances a harsh and bitter difference of opinion, about the nature of God and his relation to man, and about the nature of Jesus and the character of his mission, and about the meaning of salvation and the necessary requirements for its attainment. A one shared belief about such matters is most certainly not the case with Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, early Unitarianism and Universalism, Congregationalism and Methodism, Christian Science and Mormonism, Quakerism and Seventh Day Adventism. To say that they all believe in God, and therefore are religions, is to say very little, and beclouds the many very real differences of opinion that exist between them.

The concept of God, itself, is a much more complicated matter than many

who so readily voice a belief in God, appear to realize. A ready voicing of belief in God can be just as empty of meaning as a ready voicing of disbelief in God. At least some attention should be given to the quite various ways in which God has been conceived. One way, one of the oldest, possibly the oldest and certainly the most pronounced in Western tradition, conceives of God as a transcendent power, independent of the world of nature and man. According to this view God has will or intent, and out of that will or intent, was the creator of the universe, and stands as a guiding protecting father of his children.

This concept, however, although still widely prevalent, has long been acknowledged to be not without some serious difficulties. Most serious, of course, has been the difficulty of establishing the existence of such a power and giving convincing description of its attributes. This has never been done on the basis of what could be accepted as experimental findings; and being apparently impossible, there is little if any attempt made in that direction. Rather the very impossibility is made to support the proposition that God is uniquely unique, altogether other from man and world, and therefore quite beyond description and experimental test. The implication in this, is that there is such a power, but it is rather frankly admitted that belief in the existence of such a power must rest on faith and what is said to be Divine Revelation. Such resort to faith, however, throws no light on the presumed actuality of God's existence, and insofar as it makes admitted separation of faith from knowledge and reason it allows to faith a freewheeling interpretation of God and Divine Will, about which there has been no end of disagreement and dissension.

Another difficulty revolves about the notion that God created the world.

Even long before Darwin and his successors gave overwhelming proof that the origin of the species as well as of the earth could be given a naturalistic explanation, without resort to Divine acts of special creation, it was acknowledged by no less a theological systematizer than Aquinas that on grounds of reason alone there was no way of knowing that God had created the universe; rather than assuming that its basic components had always been present. But not being content to leave the matter there, Aquinas resorted to faith or revelation in support of belief that God had created the world, and he went on to hold that although the truths of revelation or faith are not the same as the truths of reason, nevertheless they are logically compatible. The latter, point, however, is questionable and certainly so when there is no experimental test that can be applied to faith or revelation. And what still remains as a stumbling block to acceptance of the notion of God as creator is the supposition that he created the world out of nothing. That something can be created out of nothing is wholly alien to all our experience. Always there must be some antecedently existing subject matter or material, to be reshaped or reworked in whatever manner and by whatever means may be. Even the most fertile imagination stands baffled, if not greatly disbelieving, before the thought of something being creating out of nothing. The yet unknowns about the origin of life and about the ongoing nature of the universe are relatively minor mysteries compared to the supposition that a transcendent God, however powerful, could have created the whole thing out of nothing.

And to mention one other difficulty that has ever been associated with the concept of a transcendent God - there is the problem of evil. The positing of a Divine Will that is all-powerful and all-loving has always

occasioned a concern, and more than once, an anguished concern as to why there is so much tragedy, and sorrow, and suffering, and misery in the world. Surely the Divine will, all powerful and all loving, would have prevented all this from the very beginning, or else would be moved to intervene in the order of nature and bring most, if not all of it, to an end. Such has been the normal, widespread, human reaction to the matter, and time and again through prayer and petition and sacrifice human beings have sought to influence the Divine Will and to bring about its intervention. That such intervention has ever occurred in an individual case cannot be proven, and that it has never occurred on a world-wide lasting scale is all too clearly obvious. The theological explanation that has been most commonly and persistently advanced is to the effect that God, not wishing to be even a benevolent dictator, gave man free-will and the whole matter of suffering and tragedy and evil is result of the abuse of that free will. Such explanation, however, is not particularly satisfying. One may still wonder why the divine will, which is assumed to be omniscient and therefore must have known that man would abuse or misuse his free will, would have given man so much free will as to entail the vast amount of horrible evil that has been so conspicuous a part of the human scene. At least, being a Divine Will, he might have intervened or tempered man's free will, in such matters as religious wars, and religious bigotry and religious persecution. The explanation, even more, falls down, when it comes to so much of suffering and tragedy and misery that in no way can be laid to the abuse or misuse of free will -- people killed in car accidents or plane crashes through no fault of their own and not necessarily through a deliberate act of free-will on the part of others; people killed in hurricanes and innocent victims of tyranny

and many people born blind and people born without limbs and people struck down by cancer. And still more, of course, is the whole matter of the suffering and pain that are either visited upon or native to the animal creation, below the level of man, which has seldom been credited with possession of free-will.

The explanation is decidedly lacking in applied consistency and every honest theologian, however much he may believe in the Divine Will, knows it. But, believing in the Divine Will, there is no where else he can go beyond the explanation that the whole matter is a great Divine Mystery, somehow or other it all fits into God's great design; as mortals we cannot know and we cannot understand, but some day beyond death it will all be made apparent to us.

Well, maybe so -- although I greatly doubt it -- and surrounding the problem of evil with Divine Mystery is no real explanation of the evil, and it does not dispell the anguish here and now of evil, and it does little if anything to pointedly spur an attempt at the overcoming of evil.

While the concept of a transcendent god still remains pressingly strong within our Western culture, despite the serious intellectual difficulties that attend it and have been added to it by the scientific view of a universe subject to natural law throughout and without any discernable division into the natural and the supernatural, still it is by no means the only concept of God that has been entertained. Another concept -- and one that has appealed to a considerable number of scientists and philosophers -- is that of an immanent god, rather than a transcendent god. According to this concept God is within and of the universe, rather than outside it, and quite obviously cannot be held to be a personal God to whom one can pray for intervention in human affairs and by whom one can be loved and guided and protected. It is conceived of as an im-

personal principle of immanent structure which is characterized by order and by what might even be said to be the rationality of the natural order. Thus with Spinoza, who was denounced as an atheist and heretic because of his view, God was Substance or Structure conceived as a self-sufficient network of timeless logical relations. And with Einstein, God was thought of as the order of things, without which, the success of human thought in charting the ways of things would be a matter of luck or miracle.

Such has occasioned for many scientists a vast amount of what might be called natural mysticism, a sense of rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, and most others, including ourselves, have had at times the same kind of feeling of wonder and awe before the beauties and wonders and majesties of nature. On the other hand, as others have pointed out, we should not be so overwhelmed by the wonders of nature and the apparent order of rationality in it, as to be blind to the harshness and severity associated with nature, and the destructive, eliminating paths that evolution has sometimes taken.

The general problem of evil does of course fare better with the concept of an Immanent God than with the concept of a transcendent God. An immanent God may be thought of in terms of order or pattern or rationality in things, but it cannot plausibly be held to be a personal God, and therefore it cannot be blamed, or questioned, or appealed to as has so often been the case with the concept of a transcendent God. The weather, for instance, is what it is going to be, and unhappy as some of it may make us at times, we have to take it as an intrinsic element of the cosmic order. A hurricane may leave a wake of suffering, of death and devastation, but that is one of the many vicissitudes we face as creatures of this earth and part of the natural order. Accidents may kill us, disease may get us,

there is no telling what the next day may present us with. All this is part of life as we have it, and while living with it may not be easy, still there is relief from it the mental and emotional anguish of wondering how and why an all loving and all powerful God has allowed such to occur.

What has to be guarded against in the conception of a immanent God, is the sometimes tendency to take whatever happens in the natural cosmos as necessary and thereby to jump to the conclusion that human judgements of better or worse are quite irrelevant to the course of affairs -- both in the course of nature and of history. This could lead to a paralyzing of the nerve of morality and to a deadening of the sinew of effort in such areas where morality and effort could make an imprint. It may not be possible to prevent hurricanes but measures to limit their devastation to life and property could be taken; illness and disease of one kind or another will undoubtedly always be our lot, but heightened advances in medicine could bring greater benefits; accidents will happen, but safety measures of one kind and another can keep the number from being greater than it otherwise would be.

And there has been a third conception of God "according to which God is neither a supernatural power nor a principle of immanent structure, but rather a symbolic term for our most inclusive moral ideals. It points, in the words of Sydney Hook, to that dimension in human life which is experienced whenever ideal ends, justice, compassion for all suffering creatures, dedication to truth, integrity, move men to change the world and themselves. As such it tends to view the religious man not so much in terms of belief as in terms of action or good works. One of the best known expressions of this point of view was given by John Dewey who gave the name God to what he termed "the active relation between Ideal and actual." Dewey was to somewhat regret having made use of the name God

since the associations of the word with the supernatural were so numerous and close, that any use of the word God was sure to give rise to misconception and be taken as a concession to traditional ideas. Thus he was later to re-emphasize that he would not insist that the name must be given, or must be used. And for this very reason, many of us who might otherwise be quite willing to use the term God to designate our highest ethical commitments are rather reluctant to do so.

What does emerge from all this is a realization in many quarters that religion cannot be equated with a centrality of god-belief, that any adequate understanding of the range as well as of the basic quality of religion must go beyond the parochialism of a particular religion and the arbitrarily limiting criterion of a belief in god. Thus Vergilius Ferm, writing in the Encyclopedia of Religion, says that a definition of religion must be able to include humanists, mystics, agnostics, and avowed atheists, insofar as they may be just as much involved as anyone else in what he ventures to define as religion, namely a vital adjustment, however, tentative and incomplete, to whatever is reacted to, or regarded implicitly or explicitly as worthy of serious and ulterior concern. And John Dewey, who preferred the term religious to religion, said that "any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss, because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality." And in like manner, Gustave Huxley, who was long time professor of the history of religion at the University of Chicago said that "anyone who wars against intolerance, bigotry, discrimination, cruelty and hatred is religious; that anyone who expands the area of health and healing and brings relief for the sickness of body and mind is religious; that anyone who seeks to create a just social and economic

structure is religious; that anyone who builds harmony and community in the home, in the city, in the nation and in the world is religious; that anyone who will work to bring out the latent possibilities of goodness in the nature of man is religious; in short, that anyone who strives after the yet unattained goal of the fullest life in a world made good is religious."

Thus viewed, religious experience is not something separate from other kinds of experience - the aesthetic, scientific, moral, and political. It is a quality of experience that may belong to any or all of them. And it is not restricted to any one nation, or to any one people, and it most certainly is not the monopoly of a particular theology or a particular church or a particular religion. As a matter of fact, particular theological-ecclesiastical structures have many times thwarted and blocked, through dogma and polity, the fullest expression of such religious quality. Writing on this point, Dewey has said that "faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in completed revelation. Faith in the possibilities of continued and rigorous inquiry does not limit access to truth to any channel or scheme of things. It does not first say that truth is universal and then add there is but one road to it. It does not demand assurance through subjection to any dogma or item of doctrine. It trusts that the natural interactions between man and his environment will breed more intelligence and generate more knowledge provided the scientific methods that define intelligence in operation are pushed further into the mysteries of the world, being themselves promoted and improved in the operation. There is such a thing as faith in intelligence being religious in quality."

There are many people today, including most Unitarians, who (in the light of enlarged knowledge) have had to relinquish many traditional religious beliefs. We have had to give up, if we ever held such beliefs, the belief in the duality of the natural and the supernatural and the duality of mind and body; the belief in heaven and hell, perhaps even belief in conscious personal immortality; the belief in anthropomorphic spirits and gods with evil or beneficent attitudes toward individuals; the belief in original sin and the deterioration of human life from a perfect life in a Garden of Eden; In short, we have had to relinquish almost everything that has been associated with the mainstream of Christian belief. Does the relinquishing of such traditional religious beliefs mean that we have given up religion itself? That depends, of course, on the view of religion. If these beliefs are the criteria of religion then we have given up religion, as some people rather pointedly say we have, and there is little if anything that we can say that will convince them otherwise. Still I would venture the remark that no one can give up religion itself - they can only give up certain religious beliefs. For religion is grounded today as it always has been in the unavoidable necessity of relating ourselves in some way to the universe and to the world and of enlarging individual and social values. To do so with intelligence, and courage, and dedicated commitment to the enrichment of life, is of fundamental importance and whether we are acknowledged to be religious is quite inconsequential.