

Theology Matters

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Unitarian Universalist

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Readings

from *Parish Parables*

by UU minister Rev. Clinton Lee Scott (1887-1985)

Now there was a certain man that for many years did frequent the Temple on the Sabbath day. Then did he cease to be found in the Great Congregation. And a neighbor inquired of him, saying, "How is it that thou art no more seen in the Temple on the Sabbath day?"

And the man did give answer. "I like not the words that the Master speaketh: for he putteth not an end to the questions that vex my mind, neither providing me with a sure salvation for my soul: verily he leadeth us into deep waters, and leaveth us there without means of rescue."

Now when this conversation was told to the Master of the Temple, he answered, saying, "Go tell him that remaineth away from the Great Congregation that the Temple standeth not to provide life preservers, but is a place wherein one learneth how to swim."

"It Matters What We Believe"

by UU religious educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs (1876-1978)

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. *Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.*

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days and fears of unknown calamities. *Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.*

Some beliefs are divisive, separating saved from unsaved, friends from enemies. *Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.*

Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction. *Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.*

Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness. *Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.*

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. *Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.*

Sermon

Reading the newspaper any morning of the week makes it quite clear that, echoing the Sophia Fahs reading we've just shared, it matters quite a lot these days what you believe religiously or theologically.

Religious beliefs among Americans shape political positions on issues from abortion to LGBTQ rights. Do you think the government should fund Planned Parenthood? Is a baker within his or her rights to refuse to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple? And so on, and so on.

On the scale of the planet, as we know only too well, religious beliefs have for decades been coopted by terrorists, who have no apparent compunction about blowing themselves and others up as they believe their religion calls them to do, no compunction likewise to destroy artifacts of religions other than their own – whether Buddhist statues in Afghanistan or pagan statues in museums in Iraq and Syria.

And of course religious beliefs continue to shape events and conflicts in Israel/Palestine.

Similarly you don't have to read very far into world history to discover the shaping role of religious belief – from the expansion of Islam in its early centuries, to the Crusades, to the religious impulse behind the Puritan settlements of New England, ours very much included. And you can go further back into history and discover the role that Zoroastrianism played in the Persian Empire, or Christianity for Constantine and the Romans, or the influence of Buddhism on the Indian Emperor Ashoka over two thousand years ago.

Further, any one of these influences and conflicts, dating from this morning to thousands of years ago, can be further dissected for fine points of theology that divided parties, sects, and empires. The history of Christianity, must one of the many world's religions, is riven with divisions having to do with questions about the nature of Jesus, the requirements for salvation, and on and on.

In short we could easily spend all day unearthing and discussing one example after another from history or the daily news of why theology matters.

But having made the general point that theology, religious belief, matters, and often matters a great deal on the scale of national and world history, my primary intention today is to be more personal.

Why does theology (specifically, words or ideas about God – “theo – logos” – or about the meaning of it all by whatever name) matter to us in our individual human lives? Does it really matter, really make much of a difference what we believe or don't believe about God, the meaning of life, and so on?

I think it does. And I ground this affirmation in a very early, indeed formative, experience in my own life:

I was probably about nine or ten years old when I became occasionally gripped – and I mean really gripped, to the point of tears – gripped by a fear of hell.

I don't know how I even knew about hell, though I had enough friends who were one or another variety of Christian that it could easily enough have come from one or more of them.

In any case, I still remember so clearly at least one night – might have been many – pouring my fears out to my mother.

And my mother had a response to my fear that actually helped, and helped a great deal. After all, I've remembered this conversation with my mother for all these years, remembered what amounted to a pretty sophisticated theological conversation.

In response to my fear that God might send me to hell, she said that a good God (she was assuming there was no other kind, which made intuitive sense to me too) would not have created us just to send us to hell. Simple as that!

My mother was, you might say, a Universalist in spirit without knowing it by name. For I'm pretty sure this conversation took place when we were still attending the Presbyterian church that was my parents' heritage – in other words before we joined a Unitarian Universalist church.

So, it really does matter, as Sophia Fahs affirmed, what we believe.

Matters to begin with in the most intimate of ways, as you've just heard. For *whether one lives in fear or not* is, it seems to me, pretty intimate, close to the heart.

As Sophia Fahs wrote:

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities. Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

This was surely true for me all those years ago, as my mother helped me walk out from the shadow of the fear of unknown calamities into the sunshine of happiness and love, and did so by offering a simple theological formulation: God is by definition a God of goodness and love. And a good and loving God would not condemn anyone to hell.

Now, whether you believe in a punishing God or not can get a little more complicated as it turns out – a complication which in fact divided the early American Universalists themselves.

To begin with, these 18th and 19th century American Universalists took their name from the theological affirmation of "universal salvation." They, like my mother, believed that a loving, good God (and like my mother they could not fathom any other kind) would not condemn any of "his" children to everlasting damnation and suffering.

But even among these mostly like-minded Universalists, there was an important theological difference.

Some of them believed that it made sense that there would be a period of purifying suffering after death for those who had not received adequate punishment for their sins or not fully owned up to their sins in this life (because looking around, it surely seemed as though many of the evil prospered, not suffered).

Even so, other Universalists, who were known as "death and glory" Universalists believed that each and every one of us would be immediately taken up into the loving

embrace of God upon our deaths – that whatever punishment or suffering we needed we would have experienced one way or another in this life.

And in case you think this difference of theological opinion is old news, just do a web search for “universalism and the Bible” and you will find quite a divergence of opinion among Christians on the matter, ranging from those who assert that the doctrine of universalism is based on Biblical teaching and those who assert with equal conviction that it is not, and that the Bible in fact teaches that the “unredeemed” will suffer eternal torment in hell, that yes God is a God of love, but God is also a God of justice.

Yes, theology does matter. Your theological beliefs or convictions really do affect how you live or what your attitude is towards your life – and your death.

I knew of a young man whose belief in reincarnation led him to feel there was no rush to improve his life... he would have plenty of other lifetimes to work on that. (His parents, who I knew, were concerned.)

I’ve encountered many who have tried to convert me to their belief system, their creed, because they wanted to save my soul, because they didn’t want me to go to hell, and they were certain that this would be my fate unless I came around to their beliefs.

I know some people who believe human beings are inherently good, and I know others who assert we are inherently sinful, and I know yet others who believe we have a choice in the matter. Needless to say, each one of these beliefs profoundly affects how they live.

We all know of people who believe that wars and floods are a sign of the end times... so we don’t need to work to bring peace to the Middle East or work to ameliorate climate change.

I could go on. Yes, theology matters. Personally... and globally.

With all this in mind, this week Diane Elliott and I will lead the first session this week of a class titled “Building Your Own Theology”.

As for me, I suppose that beginning with that conversation with my mother, I’ve been doing this throughout my life... often in plain view right here in this Meeting House. For I didn’t arrive at Old Ship with all the answers to life’s most perplexing questions, nor do I have those answers now. But I have been exploring the questions with you all these years, and have come to at least some tentative conclusions.

But before I mention one or two of those conclusions, let me remind you of an important point concerning our Unitarian Universalist approach to religious or theological questions and answers.

Yes, we are a free religious tradition, but this does not mean that we are each free to pick and choose or make up our theological answers on a whim. Remember, our fourth UU Principle affirms the importance of the free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning. Notice that word “responsible.”

For part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists, and part of what has characterized both the Unitarian and Universalist strands of our history over the centuries, is this: We affirm that each one of us is endowed with heart and mind, intuition and intellect, that enable us to formulate our beliefs, tentative though some of

them may be, about reality, about the big questions, about matters of ultimate meaning, theological matters... yes, freely ... yet at the same time responsibly.

This means that we end up affirming not what we wish was true, but what we have come to feel on the basis of careful thought and lived experience is most likely to be true.

And this is often, for most of us, with plenty of mystery left over, along with plenty of openness to new understandings based on fresh experience or insights.

Our church, then, our Unitarian Universalist congregation and denomination is, to put it in the terms of that reading from Clinton Lee Scott, not a place where we are given life preservers in the form of predigested answers to the big questions that may sometimes vex our minds, but rather is a place, a spiritual and theological home, where we learn how to swim in the waters of our lives – to swim with answers sometimes provisional, sometimes with a fair degree of certainty, but always at the same time with awareness of the mystery of the water's depths... depths which somehow manage to sustain us and keep us afloat, sometimes in spite of ourselves.

This last thought leads nicely, then, to a word about my theology, my always provisional theology, my words about God.

Simple in a way: God (God of many names, God transcending any name) is the whatever it is that creates and supports all that is, and at the same time *is* part and parcel of all that is. (The technical term for this theological position by the way is panentheism, and it might be another way of affirming that God is Love.)

Another way of putting this is that we are part and parcel of God, (Brahma, Tao, Spirit...) who is all around us and within us.

(Having heard all this, an atheist might wonder why not, then, dispense with the word or concept of God altogether... and this would begin a good conversation.)

Why and how does this theological belief matter? Well, it seems to me that this implies that our role in life is to engage in life, each of us in our unique way, each of us to fully live our part as best we can, contributing to this ongoing creation in which we live and move and have our being – because we *are* part and parcel of God, which means part and parcel of each other.

Finally this morning: I want to reaffirm not only that theology matters, for all the reasons I've shared this morning, but that theology perhaps matters as much or more now than ever, since our beliefs really do inform our lives and our deeds.

So with so much pressing upon us these days, I'll mix metaphors to conclude: Exploring these big theological questions, exploring with mind and heart, can help us swim in sometimes treacherous and often deep waters, can help us to discover enough ground beneath our feet that we might safely walk the often challenging pathways of our individual lives and our lives in community on this earth we share, in this quite amazing if also mysterious life we share.

So may it be.