

**Principled Religion**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Readings**

Stand By This Faith, by Rev. Olympia Brown (1835-1926)

Olympia Brown was a 19th century Universalist minister and leading voice for suffrage. She was the first woman to be fully ordained in any American denomination, and for a time served the Universalist congregation in Weymouth:

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

The Task of the Religious Community, by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed (b. 1949):

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

**Sermon**

What sort of religion do we need for our times? Or do we need any sort of religion at all? Some, after all, say that religion is toxic, that it is responsible for much more evil than good – wars, oppression, environmental degradation – and that religion in any case is filled with illusions masquerading as great truths.

Some, in retreat, call themselves atheists and are part of no organized faith community at all.

Others say that they are spiritual but not religious, and follow their own idiosyncratic paths, and may also be part of no organized faith community.

What is “religion” anyway? My “American Heritage Dictionary” (the old fashioned kind you pull off the shelf and leaf through...) says this for definition number one: “a. Belief in and reverence for a supernatural power recognized as the creator and governor of the universe. b. A particular integrated system of this expression.”

This is certainly how most people think of religion.

Looking at the root etymology of the word, however, may broaden our understanding of what might be considered a religion. The word “religion” comes from the Latin “religio” which has to do with tying or binding back, so binding to God or the sacred by whatever name. What, then, if we were to understand “religion” as anything that re-unites us with or reminds us of our union with the whole, with the interdependent web of the cosmos?

Wouldn’t this be a religion for our times, times in which our lives and our world seem so fragmented, disunited, and violent?

In the current issue of the Buddhist journal “Shambala Sun” there is a section titled “Is Buddhism a Religion?”

Three Buddhist writers offer three different answers: Yes, No, and Kind of.

And their answers to a large extent hinge on their definition of “religion.”

The first writer, Charles Prebish, who said “yes,” used a definition from the writings of Frederick Streng: “Religion is a means to ultimate transformation.” And following this definition, Buddhism of whatever variety (and there are many) is most assuredly a religion.

The second writer, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, who said “no,” seemed to assume with the dictionary that religion must always have to do with realities like God. So, by contrast he called Buddhism a science of mind, noting that in the Buddha’s own life he left behind organized belief systems and rituals – and himself was certainly not a god or considered by most followers to be so. So Ponlop declares that Buddhism could be understood as “spiritual, yes, but not religious.” He concludes: “The one who became the Buddha, the Awakened One, didn’t find enlightenment through religion – he found it when he began to leave religion behind.”

The third writer, Zen teacher Joan Sutherland, who said “kind of,” had I thought the most interesting response of the three, and I want to read to you what seemed to me to be the heart of what she had to say; she begins where I started a moment ago:

At its etymological root, religion is what rebinds or reunites us with the sacred. Many of us long for this return from exile, and then discover that it leads us toward existential danger – the deconstruction and rearrangement of our very sense of self and reality. In common usage, religion often refers to the belief systems and institutions that surround this longing. These religious structures can sometimes be attempts to control the inherent wildness and risk of the root religious impulse. Is it possible to stay true to that first meaning of religion without calling into being the empires of the second?

More simply put, Sutherland is suggesting that religious institutions of whatever variety are paradoxically too often about controlling what can be a wildness in the spiritual journey of rebinding or reuniting with the sacred, with the whole.

Why “wildness”? Because religious or spiritual experience can utterly turn inside out our conventional idea of who we are as separate individuals. You see, it is all well and good to *say* that we are part of an interdependent web of life or that we each have that of God within us, or that our true identity is Buddha nature or to be one with the Hindu Brahman, or with the Tao... but what happens when we actually experience even a taste of this reality? It can be dizzying... disorienting. We thought we knew who we were! And we didn't – didn't know the whole story anyway.

So, here's how I would go at this question of whether religion is a good or a bad thing. Religion at its worst does indeed try to control and tame universal truths with creeds and rituals – and then too often comes into conflict with other religions who tame the truths with different creeds and rituals.

But religion at its best can offer a container for universal truths, ethical precepts, and for our spiritual experiences and journeys. Might be a fine distinction, but it is an important one.

If we were to think of the spiritual journey as a river, it might be the distinction between creating straight line channels with locks and dikes on the one hand, and on the other hand simply allowing a more natural flow, disciplined by the banks of the river, but not artificially controlled.

What about Unitarian Universalism? Where do we fit as a religion? *Are* we a religion? If so, what sort of religion?

We have no creed. But then many traditions that we consider to be religions have no creeds, including some Protestant denominations as well as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism. So having no creed doesn't exclude us from the family of religions.

But we don't even have commonly accepted *beliefs*. When someone asks if we Unitarian Universalists believe in God or if we believe in the afterlife or if we believe in

Jesus as the Son of God... we have to answer in what may seem to be a weak and meek way, "Well, some of us do and some of us don't."

But we're not alone in this either. Buddhists for example don't have commonly accepted beliefs of this sort either, and many (though as we've seen maybe not all) certainly consider Buddhism to be a religion.

So... no creeds... no beliefs... not even much in the way of rituals...

What then?

Well, do have principles! Indeed, we have Principles with a capital "P". Seven in fact. They are printed on the inside cover of your order of worship, beginning with our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person and ending with our affirmation of respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, with five other related principles in between. And though they were created in their current form only about thirty years ago, each principles has roots in our tradition centuries deep. (You see, we have a shared tradition too.)

In what sense to these principles make us a religion? Or do they? And if they do, does it matter? Why would anyone want to join such a religion? (Why are you here?!)

My answer is pretty simple. I understand our Principles not as ends in themselves, but rather (in the spirit of what I was saying a moment ago) as a container and guide for our seeking, for our spiritual lives, for the journey, the search, we are each on, each in our own way, and all of us together. The fourth of our Principles, aptly right in the middle, affirms the importance of the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

This may sound dry, like an exercise of the mind only. But we must not allow it to be so. The language may be dry, but the journey is anything but. The journey is the life journey each of us is on, a journey filled with both joy and sorrow, a journey in the midst of the larger life we share with all the challenges we share in this world, a journey during which we ask ourselves the hardest of questions and maybe come to a few hard-won answers as to how we want to live, how we ought to live, in the world as it is.

It is a journey that for many of us will include one or another overtly spiritual practice from one or another of the world's traditions: mindfulness, meditation, prayer, yoga, journaling, reading. But whatever shape our personal spiritual journey may take, our principles along with our congregations, our faith communities, hold us in the midst of what can sometimes be a quite wild ride of life indeed.

Remember, that first of the Buddhist writers cited Streng's definition of religion as a "means to ultimate transformation." Maybe a little vague, but it is suggestive, leaving us with at least one very important question: transformation from what to what, from who to who? Well, it is as I've been saying, one way or another, transformation from imagining ourselves to be separate and too often selfish egos to experiencing ourselves as intimately connected (re-binding) to one another, to all life, perhaps to some higher or larger reality we might call God, Brahman, Tao... Universe.

And then behaving as such.

At least on paper, our own Unitarian Universalist Principles take us on this journey, beginning as they do with the inherent worth and dignity of every person and moving to the interdependent web of all existence.

And the second part of our Principles, the Sources of our Living Tradition, remind us that we are not without resources on our journey – that we are free to draw for inspiration from all the traditions of humanity, from our own experiences of transcendence and wonder, and from the teachings of science.

Unitarian Universalism may not be for everyone. But I would affirm that ours is indeed a tradition relevant for our lives and for our times. In my half century as a Unitarian Universalist I certainly have found our tradition to be a more than adequate container, indeed a welcoming and utterly supportive container, for my idiosyncratic personal spiritual journey towards a deeper experience of being part of the whole.

I have also found Unitarian Universalism to be of immense importance in the spirit of Mark Morrison-Reed's words from the reading. For being part of a religious community, a congregation and our larger community of congregations, itself offers the *experience* of connectedness which in turn reminds us that, in his words, "we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community." And that yes indeed, "Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

We have experienced this here at Old Ship as we worked together for equal marriage rights. Some among us are on the streets these days working with other UU's and others of like conviction for immigration rights, and for action in relation to the crisis of climate change. Yet whatever the work for justice and peace and sustainability, yes, "Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

All in all, I am sometimes moved to say that if there were no such thing as Unitarian Universalism, I would join a committee to invent it!

Perhaps you feel the same way. Otherwise, why would you be here? No one forces us to be here. We have chosen, each for our own reason, but I would expect for many shared reasons of the sort I've been lifting up today: To be reminded here that we are not alone, that life matters and that our lives matter, and that bringing love – another name for the power that binds us together... that bringing love into our lives and into the world is the most important thing we can do.

So, as we heard earlier, in the words of one of our venerable Universalist ancestors, Olympia Brown, may we "stand by this faith."

--So may it be.