



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

How Do You Define Religion? (Who Benefits? Who Decides?)

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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At the beginning of each Sunday service, I say that part of what we do here at UUCF is **“draw wisdom from all the world’s religions, balanced with the insights of modern science.”** You can see a visual display of this goal in the atrium, where a wheel of long, multicolored streamers support seven hand-crafted symbols representing not only major world religions (Buddhism, Paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) *but also* modern scientific perspectives (Atheism and Humanism). In the center of the wheel is the flaming chalice, the symbol of our Unitarian Universalist living tradition. Its placement in the center represents our openness to drawing wisdom from all of these traditions, both sacred and secular.

I would like to invite us to reflect on this challenging dynamic. What does it mean to draw wisdom from all the world’s religions in light of what we know here in the early twenty-first century? **In what sense is Unitarian Universalism a *religious* movement? And what is “religion,” anyway?** Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? Who gets to decide?

As a point of comparison regarding what constitutes being religious, let’s begin by considering a group that is even more humanist and progressive than Unitarian Universalism: the Ethical Culture movement. Just as UUCF and other UU congregations are affiliated with a larger network known as the Unitarian Universalist Association, Ethical Societies are members of a larger network called the American Ethical Union. **Is Ethical Humanism a *religious* movement? Interestingly, it is!**

On one hand, the American Ethical Union describes itself as “a non-theistic organization that is not concerned with the existence or non-existence of a deity.” On the other hand, they are also clear that, “**We are recognized as a religious movement because for us the ethical quest has the depth of a religious commitment**, and because we recognize the value of a community of support, celebration, and action.” Likewise, one of the Eight Commitments of Ethical Culture, which are comparable to our UU Seven Principles, is that, “**Life Itself Inspires a Natural ‘Religious’ Response**: Although awareness of impending death intensifies the human quest, the mystery of life itself, and the need to belong, are the primary factors motivating human religious response.” Indeed, in the late 1950s, there were multiple U.S. court cases ruling that **Ethical Societies, even though atheistic, functioned in so many other ways like more traditionally-religious congregations that they could not be denied the tax-exempt status** afforded to churches, synagogues, and other religious communities. So it turns out that even according to the U.S. legal system, “religion” is a fairly elastic word.

To say more about what is meant by words like religion and religious, let me share some of how my own interest in religion has evolved over the years. When I was in high school, **I thought I wanted to be a physician when I grew up**. My mother was a nurse, so I was around the hospital where she worked periodically as a child. I was serious enough about entering the medical field that as a high school senior I enrolled in a special course called “Health Careers,” which involved both classroom lectures (involving tests on basic anatomy, physiology, and medical terminology) and a rotating internship program in which we each spent nine months volunteering in nine different departments, one month per department. So as an eighteen year old, I was able to spend many hours shadowing Emergency Room nurses, watching many different surgeries, being in the room for live births, and more. It was a remarkable program. I loved it, and thought that was what I was going to do with my life.

But as I was preparing for “Preview Days” at a few of my top choices for college, and reading about the mini-presentations that would be offered by various departments, I was intrigued not only by the descriptions about the Pre-med Program, but also by the descriptions of the Philosophy Departments and the Religion Departments:

Religion majors learn how to clearly describe, critically analyze, and empathetically understand the religious traditions that inform the most deeply held perspectives of people past and present. With that foundation, our students are empowered to ask informed, incisive, and provocative questions about the social, moral, and personal implications of those viewpoints as well as their own religious perspectives.

If that sounds like a fun way to spend four years, then being a religion major may be right for you! I loved the prospect of immersing myself in the big questions, investigating how the best thinkers throughout the ages have pondered various possible responses, and considering how religious rituals — and experiences with the holy, the sacred, and the divine — have impacted the lives of individuals, groups, and cultures in different ways throughout history, and today. In the end, I became a double-major in Religion and Philosophy.

Now, here's a twist: initially I took terms like "Religion" and "Religious Studies" for granted as neutral terms. But as Thomas Tweed explores in his book Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion (Harvard University Press, 2008) I soon learned about their complicated and contested history. It turns out that **umbrella terms like "the world's religions" emerged out of nineteenth-century European colonialism.** And neither Japan nor India has a term in their native languages that have exact parallels to the European term "religion" (38).

I began to learn about a divide in many academic disciplines between what are sometimes called "lumpers" and "splitters." **Lumpers tend to emphasize commonalities** — for example, how diverse groups from Ethical Humanists to Christians to Buddhists all have common traits that warrant classifying them all together as "religions." In contrast, **splitters — as you can likely guess — tend to emphasize differences.**

Here's an example of what a "splitter" might point out: As Russell McCutcheon details in his book Studying Religion: An Introduction (2007), long before the arrival of European colonists, there were diverse groups around the Indus River in the area of modern day India. These diverse groups had an overlapping worldview of "duties and obligations that affect all aspects of...the almost endless cycle of births and rebirths" (17-18). But **it was nineteenth-century British colonialists who lumped all these diverse groups together as a "religion,"**

and called it “Hinduism.” And the closer you look, the more differences you can begin to see between these “duties and obligations” (called in Sanskrit *santana-dharma*) and the generic European word “religion.”

Similarly, many English translations of the Christian Scriptures include the words “religion.” However, the closer you look, the more anachronistic it seems it seems the Christian New Testament was written in a version of the Greek language that “predated Latin precursors to our modern term”—“religion.” Those Greek words like *eusebia* and *threskia* sometimes translated as “religion” are “much closer to the Sanskrit *dharma*, the Chinese *li*, and the Latin *pietas* — **all words having something to do with the quality one is thought to possess as a result of properly fulfilling sets of social obligations, expectations and ritual procedures” (McCutcheon 17-18).** These distinctions are lost in translation today for those who think all religion is either about an “inner emotional experience” or about “believing twenty impossible things before breakfast” regarding events that allegedly happened centuries ago.

Now, I apologize if the last minute or so has felt like plunging too far into the deep end of religion nerd territory. (Stay with me!) I wanted to risk nuance — because although there is a lot of truth in what I say each week (that we seek to “draw wisdom from all the world’s religions, balanced with the insights of modern science”), **the closer you look into what is meant by that term “the world’s religions,” the more the details start to matter.**

There’s a reason that scientists do not limit themselves to generic terms like “water,” but also often talk precisely about H₂O. The term “water” could have a lot of foreign substances mixed in, but the chemical formula H₂O clarifies that the referent is *precisely* a molecule containing exactly one oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms that are connected by covalent bonds. Or, whereas I might look through a telescope and see a fascinating *hole* on the moon, an astronomer might see something more technical called a *crater* (McCutcheon 19).

Or consider this wooden structure I am standing behind: is it a *lectern* or a *pulpit*? And am I delivering a lecture or a sermon? **These different terms carry with them a whole world of assumptions and connotations** (32). And whether we call something water or H₂O, a hole or a crater, religion or *santana-dharma*, a lecture or a sermon shapes both its function and how we relate to it.

So, on one hand, yes, Unitarian Universalism is a *religious* movement interested in “drawing wisdom from all the world’s religions balanced with the insights of modern science.” On the other hand, things can start to look different if you stick around here awhile and perhaps take the risk of exploring one or more religious paths or spiritual practices in more depth. Suddenly, as you move from “*secondhand religion*” (what some person or books tells you is true) to “*firsthand religion*” (what you have experienced existentially for yourself), you may begin to see some of the distinctions that were previously invisible. As Morpheus tells Neo in *The Matrix*:

You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. **You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.**

The choice is yours.

For now, I invite you to hear just a little more about some of the insights that can be gained from reflecting about what “religion” is or might be, observed from a 30,000 foot perspective. If you look up the word “religion” in the *Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, you will see a note that, “**Defining religion is often held to be difficult.**” (Um...thanks?!) “Introductions to the study of religion routinely include long lists of definitions of religion as proof of this” (Tweed 31). To be fair, this dilemma is not unique to religion. From a historical and cross-cultural perspective, it is also impossible to give a simple, uncontested definition of “What is music?” or “What is art” (32)?

To give you a sample of the many definitions of religion:

1. A more traditional definition is: “**culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings**” (Melted Spiro).
2. A more generic definition: “**An experience of the holy,**” that which is “set apart” from the ordinary and mundane (E. B. Tylor).
3. Another definition that focuses on experience: “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans,*” a **mystery that is awe-inspiring — that is terrifying yet fascinating** (“compelling yet repelling”) (Rudolf Otto). One related metaphor is that religion is like “playing with fire”: it

can be alluring and a source of warmth, but it can also be used to scare—and even literally burn you—and others.

4. One of my favorites is that religion challenges us to get in touch with our “**ultimate concern**” (Paul Tillich).

From a more skeptical perspective, religion has been defined as an *illness* (Freud), a *narcotic* (Marx), a *weakness* (Nietzsche), and a *projection* (Feuerbach) (Tweed 3, 51).

Looking deeper into the word “religion” itself, the most popular etymology of “religion” is that it derives from the Latin word *religare* (related to the English word *ligament*), such that **religion means “to bind together.”** I appreciate the ways that definition points to how religious rituals and spiritual practices can help bind us together both internally and as a community, especially when we are feeling broken.

The case has also been made that the proper etymology of “**religion**” is **instead the Latin word *religere* (“to be careful, mindful”) in the sense of reading the morning newspaper “religiously.”** And there is a strong argument that this sense more accurately captures the preponderance of religion in the ancient world, which often tended to be about a “careful performance of ritual obligation” — whereas the modern, Western sense of the word religion is often about “intellectual assent” to certain beliefs or an “inner sentiment” of faith (McCutcheon 109).

The more deeply you look into the word “religion” — or really into any important word that has been around for a while — the more complexity you will find, and the more consequential the changes in how the same word is used in substantively different ways in different times and places. So, for better or worse, there is no final, definitive answer to questions like “What is *religion*?”, “What is *religious*?”, “Who am *I*?”, “What is *music*?”, “What is *art*?” But, regarding which of many definitions we might choose to use at various times or places, there is an underlying question that I have learned to ask, which is: “**Who benefits?**”

- Are Ethical Societies a “religion” for tax purposes?
- Is smoking peyote constitutionally protected under the First Amendment as part of the free exercise of religion?
- What about polygamy? Should it be constitutionally protected on the same grounds?

These are hard questions taken in isolation that are interesting to debate. But I also encourage you to look beneath the surface of these questions, and ask the even deeper questions. If we define and categorize the word “religion” one way, who benefits? And what about if we define and categorize religion itself differently? **Which way brings people *together*? And which ways drives them *apart*? Which way empowers the *historically-oppressed* groups? And which way solidifies and strengthens an unfair *status quo* (70)?** Indeed, when European Christians first coined the term “religion,” they did not generously and generically apply it as we might today. Instead, they saw *only themselves* as “religious.” Everyone else, of course, was a superstitious heathen and sinner (69). When reflecting on categories and definitions, remember these questions: **“Who benefits? Who decides?”**

Here at UUCF, we are a “big tent” that makes space for many different spiritual paths to cross, collaborate, and coexist. And even if defining religion is an elusive task, there are many ways that this and other religious communities support us in rising to greater challenges and heights than we often would on our own. In times such as these that feel troubling and disturbing on many levels, we **don’t have to find our way alone.**

In the theologically conservative congregation of my childhood, I was taught to “work out my salvation with *fear and trembling*.” But through studying and experiencing the world’s religions, I have found a different way forward. Instead of working out *my* individual salvation with fear and trembling, I seek to work out *our* salvation — right here and now in this world. And I seek to do it not with fear and trembling, but with *hope* and *trust*. I am grateful to be on that religious path with all of you.