



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

The Price of Monotheism

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

19 January 2018

frederickuu.org

A few weeks ago, my wife and I heard a knock on our door around 8 p.m. At that time of night—and given the extremely cold weather—I assumed that the only person who could possibly be outside was someone delivering a package. I was wrong. As I opened the door, **I was greeted by two people interested in sharing their religion with me.** (It doesn't matter which flavor of religion. There are actually a few different possibilities it could be—all of which have knocked on my door at various points in the past. And it seems fair to me that if you knock on my door relatively late in the evening, you might end up as a sermon illustration.)

I will readily grant that I was impressed with their level of commitment. They were persevering through below freezing temperatures. But I will also confess that part of me wanted to say: “You have no idea whose door you are knocking on.” However, because **I was much more interested in watching television with my wife that evening than having a theological debate**, what I said was a polite but firm, “No thank you. We're not interested.”

Now, on one hand, there was no way these intrepid young evangelists could have known that they were knocking on the door of a religious professional who has been engaged in a serious academic study of religion for longer than—as far as I could tell—either of them had been alive. (Since I'm turning forty this year, I now get to say things like that, right?! You kids get off my lawn!) There is, of course, no exterior sign on our house to warn would-be proselytizers, “Beware: a Unitarian Universalist Minister lives here! Theological debate is unlikely to go well for you.” On the other hand, **there is a fairly well-known symbol outside**

my house that conveys, “We are a Jewish household.” As many of you know, my wife is Jewish.

Attached to the front doorway of our home is a fairly prominent *mezuzah*. It’s approximately six inches long, colorful, and difficult to miss. *Mezuzah* means “doorpost” in Hebrew, and it is a decorative case that holds a parchment on which two specific verses from the Torah are written. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 if you are curious.) **If you are Jewish, it is a *mitzvah* (“commandment”) to hang a *mezuzah*, and you may have noticed them outside many Jewish homes.**

It is sadly unsurprising—despite this clear marker of Jewish identity and the history of oppression from various groups trying to convert Jews—that someone would nevertheless brazenly knock on our door with an intention of religious conversion. **Presumably the assumption was that—*mezuzah* or not— there could still be a slim chance that one or more people in this household might want to hear about someone else’s religion at 8 p.m. on a weeknight.** (They were wrong. There was no chance.)

All that being said, I don’t want to use this platform to unduly bag on religions who have what scholars call a “missionary impulse” without turning the mirror on ourselves at least a little. After all, there’s the old joke that **“What do you get when you cross a missionary with a Unitarian Universalist? Someone who goes around knocking on doors for no particular reason.”**

Of course, the truth is we UUs do sometimes evangelize. **I certainly encourage you to invite your friends, family members, and colleagues who might find this religious community to be good news.** And although we are sometimes more skilled at *asking questions* than having answers, we also have a life-saving, transformational message which includes our deep experience with joining together across differences to build a world with peace, liberty, and justice for *all*.

And when you compare progressive religious movements (like Unitarian Universalism) to more theologically orthodox traditions (most of which have a stronger missionary impulse), one of the distinctions you find is that religious progressives tend to lean toward *persuasion* **instead of coercion.** We tend to be open-handedly invitational. If someone finds this

congregation to be supportive of their journey during this season of their lives, we celebrate that. If we are not the right fit for you, for any confluence of reasons (either now or in the future), we wish you well. We are a big tent that seeks to be many things to many people, but we are also clear that it is impossible to be “all things to all people.”

We believe that, “**You don’t have to believe alike to love alike,**” and we aren’t going to threaten you with eternal damnation if you disagree with us—especially since as Universalists, we don’t believe in hell. (As Unitarian *Universalists*, it’s one of our major things.) But I also understand that most religions with a strong missionary impulse authentically believe that eternal souls are at stake. So they do think they *are* acting in our best interest, even if it feels paternalistic, judgmental, and imperialistic on the receiving end.

So why bring any of this up? Well, this sermon is my annual invitation for us to spend a little time reflecting on religion as such. What is this thing called *religion*? The truth is that it’s hard to say: **religion is notoriously difficult to define.**

Although there is no simple, uncontested definition of religion, the following is my “Top Five Best Definitions of Religion” list that I have collected over the years:

5. From a traditional Western perspective, religion can be defined as a: “**culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings**” (Melford Spiro).

4. More generically, religion can be defined as: “**An experience of the holy**”—that is, an encounter “set apart” from the ordinary and mundane (E. B. Tylor)

3. Another definition that focuses on experience is “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*”—religion is about a **mystery that is simultaneously terrifying and fascinating**, compelling *yet* repelling (Rudolf Otto). One related metaphor to our UU symbol of the flaming chalice is that **religion is like “playing with fire”**: it can be an alluring and warm place to gather with friends, but it can also be used to scare—or even literally burn—you and others.

2. One of my favorite definitions is that something is *religious* if it is our “**ultimate concern**” (Paul Tillich).

1. The definition from one of my favorite religion scholars is that religion is “**humanity’s millennia-long encounter and struggle with the anomalous, the powerful, the really, really weird stuff that does not fit in, that does not make sense**” (Jeffrey Kripal).

To add in a few more major definitions of religion from a 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 this definition points to how religious rituals and spiritual practices can *bind us together* both internally and as a community.

The case has also been made that a more correct etymology of “**religion**” is **derived 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 latter sense more accurately characterizes religion in the ancient world, which often tended to center on a “careful performance of ritual obligation.” In contrast, the modern, Western sense of the word religion is often about “intellectual assent” to certain beliefs or an “inner sentiment” of faith (McCutcheon 109).

And it is this distinction between the ancient and modern understandings of religion which I would like to invite us to reflect on in particular. One helpful guide is the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1938 -), who is perhaps best known for a book about The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism, published more than two decades ago with Harvard University Press. If you are interested in going deeper, however, **a much more helpful starting point is his more recent book The Price of Monotheism** (Stanford University Press, 2010).

Dr. Assmann’s perspective emerged from decades of living as a citizen of the modern world, with its bias, especially typical in the West, of religion as being about “intellectual belief” —even while spending his career studying ancient Egypt with its very different bias toward religion as being about “careful performance of ritual obligation”. Living in that tension, he became aware of a gradual **shift in the historical patterns of religions:**

Ancient “Cult Religion”	Modern “World Religions”
Polytheistic (“many gods”)	Monotheistic (“Only One True God”)
<i>Limited</i> by culture & language	<i>Universal</i> to all times & places
Correct <i>ritual</i> observances	Correct <i>belief</i> (or inner sentiment)

<i>Oral tradition</i>	<i>Written scriptures</i>
-----------------------	---------------------------

Along these lines, some of you will recall that last week we talked about the psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s idea of the “shadow”: the repressed, unconscious parts of ourselves which nonetheless still affect us. The shadow functions not only in individuals, but also in communities, systems, cultures. And when Assmann talks about “The *Memory* of Egypt in Western Monotheism,” he is talking about a repressed shadow (119). Specifically, Assmann notes that most monotheistic traditions perceive themselves to be the “One Right Way”—and all alternatives as wrong—or at most, false deviations from their One Universal Truth. Accordingly, **most monotheistic traditions do *not* typically think of themselves as a “secondary religion” or a “counter religion” that developed in response to the polytheistic traditions that preceded them.** But from a historical perspective, that it precisely what happened (112).

To share with you a little more of my own story, I was raised in a theologically conservative Christian congregation. And there is still a lot from the Christian tradition (including much of the wisdom teachings and ethics) that I still value deeply—just not the theologically orthodox part. I bring that background up because, although I do not have anything like the expertise in Egyptology that Dr. Assmann has, during my junior year in college, I did have the opportunity to visit Cairo. At that point, I had spent the two previous years trying to reconcile the conservative theology of my childhood with the new academic insights I was learning as a religion and philosophy double major. **One of my particular interests was the study of the historical Jesus:** trying to discover who he really was, and what actually happened during his life.

But standing in front of the Great Pyramids at Giza, the oldest of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—built a full two millennia prior to the life of the historical Jesus—my interest in the Jesus of Nazareth (although still with me even today) was suddenly and profoundly *relativized*. Funnily enough, as I sat down in the desert sands and took in this mind-blowing Wonder of the Ancient World, the song lyric that popped into my head was from a Sarah McLachlan album released two years earlier, about a man wearing “**a cross from a faith that died before Jesus came.**” The song is describing an ankh, which looks like a plain Protestant

Christian cross, except there is a loop or handle at the top. In the language of Egyptian hieroglyphics, the ankh symbolizes “eternal life.”

For Assmann, the most significant aspect of the shift he traces in the history of religions is the move **from the ancient world of “non-exclusive religions” to the increasing predominance of “exclusive religions”** (3). Of course, ancient “non-exclusive religions” also made truth claims, but they were truth claims made *within* the context of tribal cults and *limited* to a particular language and culture. These truth claims were distinct from modern truth claims which are often made in a cross-cultural sense that implies conclusive and exclusive authority applicable to all persons, in *all* times and places.

Another crucial point for Assmann is that these ancient religions were *polytheistic* (3). And echoing the insights of the philosopher David Hume (1711 - 1776) more than two centuries ago, **polytheism is both “far older than monotheism” and tends toward tolerance—whereas monotheism tends toward intolerance.** And it is this intolerance that Assmann suggests is “the price of monotheism.” Because polytheism has *many gods*, there is a built-in tendency toward *tolerance*—at least internally within local cultures (14). In a polytheistic culture, *you* can have an altar in your house to your family’s favorite god within the pantheon, and *I* can have an altar in my house to my family’s favorite god or goddess—and it is no problem for either of us. But traditional monotheism tends to declare alternative views to be problematic, heretical, and unacceptable. Allow me to be clear that neither I nor Assmann are attempting an undue broadside against all forms of monotheism. A **crucial distinction** is whether one is monotheist in the spirit of “This is what I think is true, but you are free to disagree with me” as opposed to “I have the only truth, and it is imperative to use all means necessary—including violence—to *force* as many people as possible to conform to my belief system.”

Part of Assmann’s hope is that highlighting our species’s ancient heritage of polytheism might be helpful for us in navigating the globalized, pluralistic, postmodern world in which we find ourselves. Although we do increasingly live in isolated news bubbles in which we often see only views that reinforce our own pre-existing prejudices, our world remains both deeply diverse and inextricably interconnected. To quote Dr. King: **“We must either learn to live together as brothers [and sisters], or we are all going to perish together as fools.”**

I am also aware, of course, that our tradition is called *Unitarian Universalism*—which could be interpreted as sounding a lot like monotheistic imperialism: *one God* (“Unitarianism”) *for everyone* (“Universalism”). And our movement has at times been guilty of arrogance along those lines.

But at our best, our intention and impact have been more *cosmopolitan*, seeking to be a big tent—and to hold space for a diversity of people and practices within one shared beloved community. Our goal is to model a way of practicing spirituality and building a beloved community that accounts for the deep history of how religion evolved over time and continues to evolve.

In that spirit, as we continue to reflect on how we can be authentically religious here in the early twenty-first century, I invite you to consider with me a favorite UU hymn, “Blue Boat Home.” I spoke earlier about the breath-taking perspective offered by standing in front of the 4,000-year-old pyramids in Egypt—two thousand years *older* than Jesus of Nazareth. That perspective inspired Jan Assmann to trace the shift we have been exploring between ancient and modern religions. But there is no reason to think that such paradigm shifts will end there. This hymn is about a similarly breath-taking perspective that articulates our place on our one shared planet, spinning on the periphery of one spiral galaxy—a galaxy which is merely one of more than two *trillion* galaxies in the universe. May we celebrate together this newer global—and ultimately, *cosmic*—experience of religion.