



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Who Owns Religion?

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

6 December 2020

frederickuu.org

Part of what I say at the beginning of each Sunday Service is that as Unitarian Universalists, “We draw wisdom from all the world’s religions, balanced with the insights of modern science.” And at least once a year, I like to invite us to take a step back and reflect on what that means.

Let’s start with a graph (available at [this link](#)) that will help us unpack what we mean specifically by the term “the world’s religions”—and how religions relate to one another—especially in terms of relative size:

- 2.4 billion Christians (almost a third of all humans alive today, about half of which are Roman Catholic)
- 1.9 billion Muslims (87% are Sunni)
- 1.2 billion Unaffiliated
- 1.2 billion Hindus
- 500 million Buddhists
- 400 million Indigenous/Folk traditions
- 60 million Other Religions (combined), including 25 million Sikhs (mostly in India), 8 million Daoists (mostly in China), 5 million Bahá’ís, 4 million Jains (mostly in India),

Shintos, Zoroastrians, and more.

- 15 millions Jews
 - 187,689 members of UU Congregations, compared to 675,000 adults in America who broadly identify as UU, who we sometimes lovingly refer to as “free-range UUs.”
- Size isn’t everything, but the number of adherents does impact factors such as the likelihood of having personally met someone of that religion, etc. (Tweed 91-92).

Another important factor to mention is that the numbers on this slide are from one moment in time, but all these numbers are always changing. And if we fast-forward to the future, extrapolating demographic trends thirty years to 2050, the change that stands out most is that Islam is continuing on track to overtake Christianity for the top spot population-wise (Graph). The current best guess of demographers is that Islam will become the world’s largest religion by 2070.

Now, let’s consider these same groups from a different angle. What does it mean to put such a diverse array of practices and beliefs—all the forms of Buddhism, all the flavors of Christianity, all the types of indigenous, Islamic, and all other religions—all under one umbrella called “religion”? At that point, what does religion even mean? Do we highlight the commonalities? (And in what way does that mask the important differences?) The multifaceted complexity and intense variety of the world’s religions is the primary reason that the word religion has always been notoriously difficult to define.

So although it is important to stipulate that there is no simple, uncontested definition of religion, I have been studying the field of religion for many decades at this point, and I will share with you my “Top Five Best Definitions of Religion” list that I have collected over the years:

5. From a traditional western academic perspective, religion has been defined as a **“culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings”** (Melford Spiro).
4. More generally, religion has been defined as, **“An experience of the holy”**—that is, an encounter “set apart” from ordinary or mundane aspects of reality (E. B. Tylor).
3. Another definition that focuses on experience is religion as an encounter with a **mystery that is simultaneously terrifying and fascinating** (“*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*”) (Rudolf Otto). One related metaphor particularly appropriate for to our UU symbol of the flaming chalice is that religion is like [“playing with fire”](#): it can be alluring and a source of warmth, but it can also be scary or can even burn you (Margaret M. Mitchell).
2. A quite useful definition of how religion functions is that anything is religious if it becomes our **“ultimate concern”** (Paul Tillich).
1. My favorite definition comes from my favorite religion scholar, who defines religion as **“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). ([Tweed](#) 3, 51)

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).

To briefly dive deeper into the word “religion” itself, there are two major etymologies about the word’s origins. The most popular etymology of “religion” traces its derivation from the Latin word *religare* (related to the English word *ligament*). From

this perspective, **religion means “to bind together.”** I appreciate the ways that definition points to how religious rituals and spiritual practices can be powerful ways of building community. The shadow side, of course, is that religion can also be abused to bind people together in a controlling, cultish way.

Although I like that first etymology of religion, this second one I am about to share with you is arguably the correct one historically. This etymology traces the origins of the word “**religion**” from the Latin word *religere* (“to be careful, mindful”) in the sense of reading the morning newspaper “**religiously.**” This perspective is especially helpful for understanding ancient religion, which 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).

So why does it matter how we define religion? Two reasons that religious definitions matter for UUs come particularly to mind. The first is that they invite us to consider what it is we are doing anytime we gather and light our chalice—the symbol of our UU living tradition. Both literally and metaphorically we are playing with fire. And as we referenced earlier, that flame is not only alluring, fascinating, and a source of warmth, but it can also be scary or even burn you. Many times we are held, supported, uplifted, and even transformed by religious community and experiences. Other times, religion or religious community can hurt or harm us.

A second reason religious definitions matter is that they impact how we navigate religious controversies. Some of you, for instance, may have been following the news about the recent 5-4 Supreme Court decision *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v.*

Cuomo, which sided with religious congregations seeking to defy public health regulations related to the Covid-19 pandemic. I personally share the concerns expressed by many legal commentators that this is a potentially dangerous precedent. This case has been called “one of the two most significant religion cases of the past 30 years, and may prove to be one of the most important religion decisions in the Court’s history.” It is also an example of the implications of the newest Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett providing a crucial fifth vote. There’s so much to say about this decision that I want to save it for next month for our annual service focusing on the freedom of religion, the First Amendment, and how these have been—and might be—best interpreted, understood and enforced in a way that is fair for all—not merely for some.

But even just mentioning this court case is a good reminder that the subject of religion (especially religion in the public square) very quickly draws us in to the deep end of the pool. Because religion involves some of our highest values and most transformative experiences, it can lead to some of our strongest disagreements.

As I’ve been reflecting this past week on how it is that we UUs came to have a regular practice of drawing wisdom from all the world’s religions as well as modern science, a story kept coming to mind from our own UU history of just such a controversy—one that quickly got us into the deep end of the pool.

Come with me for a short journey back in time, back a little more than 150 years to the year 1838. That summer in mid-July our Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson was invited to be the commencement speaker at the graduation of that year’s

class of seminarians from Harvard Divinity School. Emerson was thirty-five years old at the time, having graduated from Harvard College seventeen years earlier.

At the time, the words he spoke were so controversial that it would not be until 1866—almost three decades later—that he would again be invited to speak at Harvard. A three decade ban from your alma mater! Ironically we know that today, Emerson’s legacy definitively has had the last laugh. Today there is a permanent endowed professorship at Harvard Divinity School called the “*Ralph Waldo Emerson* Unitarian Universalist Association Senior Lecturer in Divinity”—and the worship space in which he delivered his controversial “Divinity School Address” has been renamed the “*Emerson Chapel*”—but in the mid-nineteenth century it was very much not clear that Emerson would come to be so celebrated.

At the time, the influential Harvard professor Andrews Norton (known as the “Unitarian Pope”) condemned Emerson’s commencement speech in a pamphlet with the none-too-subtle title “The Latest Form of infidelity” (*The Annotated Emerson* 100). As a side note, Norton was not a total villain. He was quite progressive in his early career, opposing Calvinism and Trinitarianism, but (relatively speaking) he began to be perceived as an arch-conservative for his opposition to the even more progressive Transcendentalism.

I’ll limit myself to giving you three quick quotes from Emerson’s address. First, he criticized Christian traditions for dwelling with “**noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus**” (107). That may seem harsh. But for Emerson it was important not to get lost in revering what allegedly happened in the past; instead, he called us to focus

on cultivating whatever it was that Jesus had in ourselves in the present in ways that were relevant for us.

Along these lines, Emerson's charge to those gathered graduates, their families, and faculty members was to **"cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity."** Again, there is such a tremendous difference between *secondhand* religion (what others tell you is true) and *firsthand* religion (what you have experienced directly for yourself) (116).

And in that spirit, his prescribed "remedy" for this "deformity" as **'first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul'** (119). What does that mean? Think of the spirit of the Romantic poets: Keats, Shelley, Blake, Byron Wordsworth—not cold calculating reason alone, but poetic emotion inspired by nature and personal experience. Emerson was a significant part of what became known as the Transcendentalist Revolt within Unitarianism. This shift was also part of a great opening: not limiting ourselves merely to the Christian tradition alone, but exploring—particularly at the time—the religions of the East; and not limiting ourselves to simply a neck-up religion of mind, but also exploring the truths of the heart and the spirit.

Overall, there are a lot of people out there who would love to tell you that they own religion, that they have the one right interpretation. But, as I know many of you are well aware, the truth is that reality is much more complicated than that. And although there are many more important points along the way, Emerson's 1838 "Divinity School Address" was a significant contribution toward forming us into an intentionally pluralistic religious movement that draws wisdom from all the world's religions, balanced with the insights of modern science. We stipulate up front that we do not

believe alike, but we seek to explore how we might work together in coalition across our differences.

And moving to the final paragraph of Emerson's address, he concluded on that fateful day with a call for every person to explore for themselves the same supreme Beauty that inspired the world's religions in the first place. Religion can be so much more than revering what allegedly happened to someone else a long time ago. It can be about what you have experienced firsthand, for yourself. And in his final sentence Emerson calls on us to show "that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy." That sounds a whole lot like 'drawing wisdom from the heart of the world's religions, balanced with the insights of modern science.'

And our closing hymn, appropriately quoting another nineteenth-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, describes the sort of religious movement that we seek to be—one that no one could ever own:

Be ours a religion
which like sunshine goes everywhere,
its temple all space,
its shrine the good heart,
its creed all truth,
its ritual works of love.