

What is Religion?  
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My grandmother was a liberal Mennonite. Although she did not dress like the Amish when I visit Pinecraft, the small neighborhood community of 3,000 Amish and Mennonites in Sarasota, I think of my grandmother. Many older women in that community remind me of her, a strong, kind Mennonite, who lived to be 103.

I think of my grandmother when I think about the question “What is religion?” because it was she who first expressed doubts to me about whether or not Unitarian Universalism is really a religion. When I was ten years old, visiting Grandmother in Idaho with my cousin Dix, one evening she proposed that we play a board game. We would each take turns answering a question and then roll the dice and move forward on the board.

The questions were on the Bible. The Unitarian religious education program that my parents took me in the 1950s, did have an excellent second grade program about the old Testament story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. However, at the age of ten I had only a very vague understanding of the rest of the Bible. I was like the school children faced with a Bible examination. According to the story, the children guessed.

What was the First Commandment? When Eve told Adam to eat the apple.

What is the fifth Commandment? Honor thy father and mother.

What was the name of Noah’s wife? Joan of Ark.

My answers were not this funny, but I clearly lacked a basic knowledge of the Bible. My grandmother set aside the game and asked me “What is the name of the church your parents are taking you to?” “Unitarian,” I answered. “Is that a real religion?” “Sure,” I said. “We meet Sunday morning, mom and dad go to hear a sermon and I go to Sunday school.” Grandmother did not look convinced.

Over the years, I have encountered a number of people who question whether Unitarian Universalists are religious. To be religious, they tell me, is to believe in God. American Unitarian Universalism does not require a belief in God, and therefore it is not a religion.

Over the years, I have developed a response to this claim that Unitarian Universalism is not a religion, based on the history of the word. When I think of the word religion, in my imagination I think about a time a thousand years ago. Groups of men or groups of women in France came together and form a monastic community.

Some word historians believe that it was at this time in France in a convent or a monastery, that the word “Religion” was first invented. They speculate that the etymology of religion lies with the Latin word religare, which means “to tie or to bind.”

No one knows for sure, but the theory is that the members of convents or monasteries used the word to refer to the rules that tied the communities together. This included vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the higher authorities in the church. These rules bound the religious community together. Word historians think that the French used the Latin word *religare* to refer to this commitment to a life built on monastic vows.

The Norman conquest of 1066 brought this word to the English language. French speakers took control of England. During this 300-year Norman occupation, the English adopted about 10,000 French words into English, some three-fourths of which are still in use today. One of these words is *religare*, which started to appear in English as *religion* eight hundred years ago to refer a belief in God. In old manuscripts *religion* described piety and devotion, respect for what is sacred, moral obligation, and belief in the divine.

At first, the word *religion* had only a Christian meaning. However, over time as English-speaking peoples became aware of the diversity of belief the meaning evolved, to describe non-Christian rituals and beliefs. Today some dictionary definitions still say that the word *religion* refers to "the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods." Under this definition, because Unitarian Universalism does not *require* a belief in God, saying that we are not a religion is correct. Under this definition, Buddhism is also not a religion, because Buddhism does not have a concept of God.

I prefer a broader definition. Starting with the etymology of tying or binding together and I arrive at this definition.

Religion is the human effort to link all of our experiences into a meaningful whole that gives purpose and direction to our lives.

Under this definition, Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism are both religions. However, as I look at my own definition, an important word is missing that I want to add. At least three philosophers use the word in their own definitions of religion.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, in *The Christian Faith*, defines religion as "the **feeling** of the infinite, an awareness of being impressed by, and a sensibility to the universe as a whole."

Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, defines religion as "the experience of encounter with the Holy, which produces the **feelings** of awe, mystery, and fascination."

Henry Nelson Wieman, in *The Source of Human Good*, defines religion as "the wide-open **feeling** for the rich, novel fullness of the creative process inherent in all of life."

In other words, Religion originates in feeling. It is very intimate and personal. A religion flows from emotions, senses and sensations. It is the first impression. Logic and reason come later. Ideas and theories are down the road. So my definition should read:

Religion is the human effort to link all of our *feelings* and experiences into a meaningful whole that gives purpose and direction to our lives.

In my mind when I say "religion," I visualize a web connecting all the various parts of my life, my feelings and experiences into a meaningful whole. The bad, the good, and the mysterious.

When I was eight, four boys bigger than myself decided that it would be a fun game each day at recess to chase me, tackle me, hold me down and hit me as I struggled. As they played this game day after day, I felt afraid. I had questions about hatred and power, questions about sadism and evil. These are religious questions.

When I was twelve, I climbed to the top of an old volcano in Arizona. I stood on the edge of the crater, more than 8,000 feet in elevation and I looked out at the trees and mountains. I felt awe in the presence of this majesty, and I wondered about the nature of the universe and my place within it. These are religious questions.

When I was thirty-one, in the morning I was present for the birth of my first child. It was an amazing miracle, seeing a human life take its first breath. Later that day, in my role as a minister, I visited a church member whose partner had just died. In the presence of birth and death, I felt deep joy and sadness all mixed together. I wondered about the nature of life.

In my imagination I see religion as a web of links connecting these feelings and trying to give them meaning and purpose. I breathe deeply, and ask myself, who am I? Where am I going? How am I related to the universe? What are my highest values? Where is the source of comfort and support? Besides thinking, I join in rituals. I bow, or sing, or pray, or meditate because I am seeking to feel links and connections to help me make sense of these experiences.

In sixty-four years of feelings and experiences, I have come to some conclusions, my own views, which in this community you are free to accept or reject. I believe that one of our purposes is to survive, as individuals and as the human race. When we are doing things to continue our survival and the survival of our species, our actions have meaning and purpose. Put another way, I believe we are here to learn to love each other and learn to love the earth.

I also believe we are here to create beauty, in music, in art, in writing and drama. In addition, I believe we are here to understand, to learn about the nature of the universe. Sometimes that knowledge, when it is medical or environmental knowledge, will help us survive. However, sometimes, such as when we send a spaceship to photograph Pluto, or we send researchers into a cave in Africa, we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe purely for the sake of learning. I think this is part of our purpose as human beings. All my actions tie me to these purposes or detract from them. The activity of making these connections is the activity of religion.

I want to think this through myself, without anyone telling me what to believe. However, I do not want to do this alone. Because you are here, I assume it is the same for you. At certain places along the journey of life, many of us long to be in the supportive and joyful company of others who are seekers like themselves. We want to join in conversation and learn from each other, without being told what to believe. Therefore, we join this religious community to explore, with

good companions, the nature of life. We are a community of seekers, pledged to help each other, trying to connect our feelings and experiences into a meaningful whole.

The religious community is a primary mode of belonging, accomplishing a variety of tasks that the individual alone cannot do.

I see it in your faces. Wherever I am speaking, be it Sarasota, Transylvania, or Lakewood Ranch, before a service Sunday morning I watch the congregation.

When you first enter, many of you are excited, talkative, glancing around for friends. In Sarasota, it is so noisy that I have eliminated the prelude. Of course, some of you are quiet and reserved, as you eavesdrop on the conversations around you. Some of you thoughtfully look out the windows. Some of you are trying to decide if you made the right decision. You wonder. Perhaps you should have stayed home to watch Donald Trump on Meet the Press.

At the appointed time, we start the hymn. I feel a focus in the room and you do your best to sing together. If all goes well, you relax. During the hour, I notice the faces softening. The coiled bodies unwind. The gritting teeth separate. The nerve-endings are no longer popping through the skin. It is not apathy, or boredom. It is an openness to religion; it is your own effort to link, to connect your experiences, your feelings into a meaningful whole.

My Mennonite Grandmother died in 1987 at the age of 103. However, if she were here today I would introduce her to all of you and say, "Grandmother, these wonderful, loving imperfect people are my congregation. They are just as wonderful, just as loving and just as imperfect as the Mennonites in your church. Yes, grandmother, the people here are just as religious as people in more traditional churches are. Just like you, they are trying in community to discover the purpose of life and to support each other in trying to live according to that purpose.

I think she would understand.