

Proof in the Pudding

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City

March 13, 2011

Proof in the Pudding
March 13, 2011

In a New Yorker cartoon not long ago, an intellectually looking fellow who seemed quite exhausted from it all says to a friend: "I'm looking for religious ignorance." Sometimes that sounds pretty good. I wonder if folks who saw that cartoon felt a certain affinity with the fact that life would be so much less complicated if religion were merely a routine habit of showing up for services with no demands of scrutiny. But when the toothpaste brimming with enlightenment is out of the tube, it's impossible to squeeze it back in.

According to the latest Pew Research Center poll, apparently most Americans are content with religious ignorance. The poll revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that half the Catholics didn't understand communion; most Protestants didn't know that Martin Luther started the Reformation; almost half of all Jews polled didn't know that Maimonides was Jewish. The high point of the poll was that the best informed about religion were atheists. I don't think that Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris in their popular books that exalt atheism as our salvation changed anybody's mind. The truth is, when people feel a disconnect or some cognitive dissonance with the religion of their childhood, they examine it thoroughly before cutting their ties. Only after a thorough investigation of one's questionable faith will people begin searching for a more intellectually compatible belief system. Most people become informed consumers of a particular faith before departing from it.

Sometimes a person may willfully opt for religious ignorance by staying in their religious tradition despite their own religious and intellectual growth. For example, a new member of this congregation told me that a survey was conducted at the Federal Heights ward. In answer to the question: Do you believe in God, 40% said "no." I don't want to tempt anyone to go to the Federal Heights Ward House, but it shows the obvious discrepancy between personal beliefs and the culture of one's religious affiliation.

In fact, most of us everywhere ought to be conscious of...and perhaps we already are...conscious of how compatible our personal beliefs really are with the social aspects of the church or synagogue or mosque we attend. Often people don't mind swallowing a bit of their actual beliefs in order to participate in the communal activities of religion, which often prove extremely affirming and uplifting. We are, after all, social creatures, and being in community often nourishes the soul.

Essentially, if you know who Martin Luther was or wasn't, or if you understand communion and the meaning of transubstantiation or not, it really doesn't matter. Nor does it matter if you know which year Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered the Divinity School address which practically made the whole world suspicious of Unitarians...it doesn't matter because you can still call yourself Unitarian if you enjoy singing protest songs and drinking coffee. By the way, in case the Pew

Research Poll ever asks you...it was 1838. I couldn't rest easy if I didn't supply the answer.

The point is that the greatest majority of Americans, come the weekend, don their religious outfit (so to speak) and wear the wardrobe of a Catholic or Lutheran or Jew or Jehovah's Witness or Muslim or Mormon, participate in the communal aspects of that tradition, and then go home and live the rest of their week.

In that scenario, however, religion is given short shrift. The outward social stuff of religion has been taken care of. What's going on inside? What does religion mean aside from going to church? The psychologist, William James, rightfully argues that religion resides in the core of our being. It is deeply personal, and although we may take comfort or refuge in the social patterns of religious communities, religion is first and foremost deeply personal. In his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he explains it this way:

"Religion shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine." Religion, then, if we really want to tap into it, takes place in personal and solitary moments rather than in the social or group experience we find in houses of worship.

Religion is about making sense of what is moral, and identifying the principles that shall guide the commitments we make in life so that when we come to our last breath, we can claim that our lives were worth dying for.

We come to terms with our own mortality far better if we know – deep down – that our lives really mattered. We're all going to die, but we want to believe that we lived in a manner, which made our life worth dying for. Did we, in fact, live up to certain responsibilities that were in keeping with our understanding of what the divine expects of us?

Religious liberals tend to dismiss the divine as that from which they escaped. They want nothing to do with it. But William James attaches no specific qualities to divine, and instead, wants to merely separate that which holds significance for us from the ordinary routines of our lives. What does hold significance for you?

In those precious solitary times, away from the din of the crowd and church customs, we are more likely to hear (as suggested in my favorite prayer) that song we were meant to sing in our hearts and a purpose in our minds we were meant to pursue. These flashes of insight do not come about idly. There's always a catch, a certain responsibility attached. In the classic sense, we know of Jonah who hears the call to go to Nineveh but doesn't want to accept the responsibility. He likes it just where he is, thank you very much.

The human inclination is to remain in our comfort zones with few responsibilities. Most everyone here would have said to God: "No thank you. I don't think I'll be going to Nineveh today." Our sense of responsibility generally begins and ends with doing our professional or vocational work well. One tries to be a good physician, lawyer, teacher, administrator, custodian, cab driver...whatever. But does that not evade a deeper responsibility to respond to what is called in Hebrew, "Tikkun Olam" - - to heal the world? We might even frame it as a kind of obedience to that which instructs us to be selfless in our love for human decency and justice. Selfless in our concern for the shape of things to come, owning a responsibility for the consequences of social policies and human behavior. Even Aristotle made the distinction between making a living and making a life. (It's the life we want to make worth dying for).

If religion takes us out of our routines to where we feel accountability to our neighbor, to the poor, to seek justice and create peace in the world, then there's little wonder why many might prefer "religious ignorance." Who wants to work that hard? Why not end one's responsibility by simply executing one's professional duties well, and then join a congregation for those social and communal activities? In that way, religion becomes more like something you wear than something you internalize. We can put on clothing of doctrine and creed without every fully understanding or even hearing a divine call to create a just and loving world.

It seems quite puzzling how people will pray for the poor and needy on Sunday, but spend the rest of the week bashing the government for doing something about it.

Might there be a tendency to confuse charity with justice? Charity is easy, justice challenges the power structures that promote the need for charity in the first place. Food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare are human rights, not gifts bestowed charitably by those who feel virtuous.

I want to introduce a simple idea by Nietzsche. The last time I did that here everyone felt depressed. (Nietzsche doesn't cut it on a Sunday morning). But this one is easy. He said back in 1874 that the only real test of a philosophy's validity was to find out if you could live by it. Philosophy can deteriorate to mere words and random theories, but the proof of a philosophy's viability rests in whether or not you can internalize it and live by it. Just like the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of a philosophy (essentially) is in its ingestion. If it gives you stomach cramps, get rid of it. If it makes you feel stronger and think more clearly and there's no discrepancy between hearing the words and living their ideals, then you have found the right philosophy to live by. Might not the same be said of religion? You want a religion that reflects the life of meaning you feel in your soul. What you feel in your solitude, away from the hoopla of the crowd, informs you what a gift life really is and the responsibilities attached to makes it truly meaningful. The proof is in the religious pudding. It all has to be internalized.

Our relationship with the divine or that which calls to us on a profound level, varies with each individual, but only to a point. There are universal demands that must be fulfilled if we are ever to attain (what is termed so poetically) – the kingdom of God. (Quite an image). We are all called to certain extent, as Jonah was called, to hear the urgent message that our commitment must extend beyond our self-interests.

Marcus Borg, professor of religion and culture at Oregon State, understands the power of religion not as a superficial house of worship we routinely attend, but as a force once internalized, that can work towards a new social vision. He refers to this as the “internal dynamic of religious life.” It’s inside of us. The proof is in the pudding. He defines God quite simply: “God is that which stands against domination.”

In the context of today’s global concerns, if we have internalized religion we need to ask: “Am I helping to diminish the domination over the earth? Earth justice can never succeed as long as we selfish gain from the planet’s finite resources.

God stands against domination. Am I working to alleviate the domination over the poor and minorities and all those who appear as “different.” Is my compassion roused to the point where I care enough about suffering to change the world?

[You know, sometimes religious ignorance doesn’t sound so bad.]

Jim Wallis, a Christian evangelist who is also a Democrat, broadly hints that members of congress may profess being religious but they have failed to internalize religion...they fail to live their lives religiously outside of attending church on Sundays. If we look at the federal budget as a moral document, and so many programs lie on the chopping block, he has launched a campaign that asks: What would Jesus cut? I don’t think it’s about second-guessing Jesus, but internalizing his teachings and once absorbed, then making decisions on which programs to cut. The proof is in the pudding but you have to swallow the damn pudding to begin the process.

Wallis said we didn’t get into this financial mess because we spent too much on the poor. And cutting programs that help the most vulnerable isn’t going to get us out of our financial troubles or reduce the deficit in ways we now need.

Aside from removing any funding to NPR...which is really a conspiracy to end Unitarian Universalism, we need to be aware that by bringing home 5000 troops from Afghanistan we could manage to fund:

Head Start

The low-income home energy assistance program

WIC – The women, infant, and child nutrition assistant program

Hunger-free community grants

The McGovern-Dole food aid program (a throw-back to before bi-partisan became a dirty word)

The president’s emergency plan for Aids Relief

The Global Health and Child Survival account
The millennium Challenge Account
Peace Corp

Here's what's in the pudding: Matthew 25...You will be judged by how you treat the least of these. If all the religious folks in Congress had indeed "internalized" religion, then the inclusivity that Jesus made so visible and public would guide the hatchet that cuts the programs for the poor. The human cost of budget cutting would become transparently obvious. We need to ask Congress as well as ourselves: What is religious life really all about?

A little known Croatian-American theologian named Miroslav Volf, makes a distinction between "thick" religion and "thin" religion. It may sound obvious but he makes an extremely important point: "Thin religious which is pretty much reduced to following a formula, does not lack religious zeal. As an example of thin religion, he cites Rwanda, where faithful churchgoers – people who were there every Sunday, took up machetes against their neighbors.

Thick religion is equally obvious, but his example reinforces Borg's contention that God represents all acts against dominion. So Volf touts the Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Peace prize laureate, Wangari Maathai for her astonishing and heart-warming accomplishment in the planting of 30 million trees, fighting governments and industrialists in the process.

In closing I would only add that we appreciate the mystery inherent in religion and realize fully it is not a simple matter of rules and rituals. Religion is not a matter of simply walking into a church. The cosmologist, George Ellis, proposes that there are ethical principles built into the very fabric of the universe in the same mysterious but certain way that the laws of physics are embedded.

In our solitary moments...in our relationship with the divine...we discern the truths by which we must live if we are to be faithful to ourselves. And how do we know which laws and principles are right for us? Well, the proof is in the pudding. The proof is in our living. May all our lives be worth dying for.