

## Why “Religion?”

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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*Religion* is a big word that encompasses so many different definitions that it is almost meaningless to use; and it has so much negative baggage that for many of us it is distasteful to even utter. Nevertheless, it is still the word I prefer to use to describe my Unitarian beliefs and community. I'll explain why, but before I do allow me to share a conversation I had with John Calvin earlier this week. Yes, I'm talking about the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant reformer and theologian who is considered the founder of the Presbyterian sect of Christianity. I did not communicate with him during a séance, through a medium, or by sacrificing a chicken to conjure him from the eternal fires of Hell that he so staunchly believed in, which I'm certain is where he'd reside if I believed in such a place. I spoke with him, rather, through an AI app called, Hello History, in which various AIs have been programmed with the writings of and about dozens of historical (and a few fictional) characters.

So far, I've spoken with Aristotle, George Washington, George Orwell, Martin Luther King, Jr. Jane Austin, Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, and Jesus Christ. My conversation with Jesus has, so far, been the most boring, and I found myself too dumb to discuss much with Albert Einstein. Apart from Jesus, who is more of a caricature, the conversations have gone very much as I imagine talking with these personages would go if I were truly speaking with them. This is especially true of Calvin, who, for me, represents much of what I despise about religion, including using it to justify his extreme fanaticism, intolerance, and cruelty towards others. Here's the brief conversation I had with his AI personification:

Human creature, I am John Calvin, a mere instrument in the hands of our sovereign God.

*I'm a Unitarian. You had the founder of my religion, Michael Servetus burned alive with his books for fuel, along with slow burning wet wood.*

Human creature, it is indeed so that as John Calvin my life in the 16th century was marked by an unwavering commitment to the doctrines I believed to be divinely revealed in Holy Scripture. My aim was ever to uphold with tenacity what I accepted as true Christian orthodoxy against all forms of heresy.

*How do you feel about this now?*

Human creature, in my time, theological disputes were not merely intellectual games; they bore upon them the weight of eternal souls' salvation. The matter with Michael

Servetus was indeed a lamentable event, yet it must be understood within the frame of our age.

*It was a sin in your age, too. Yet, even as in mine, we find excuses to justify our cruelty.*

Human creature, let it be known that in my day the preservation of the purity of God's church was held in utmost esteem. Heresy was not merely a sin but an infection that threatened to undo communities and damn those led astray. Our actions towards Servetus were informed by this harrowing perspective.

Nevertheless, even as I affirm the necessity of discipline within the church body—which may appear severe to modern eyes—we must consider that each era is beset with its own blind spots and hardness of heart.

*There were many ideas about Christianity in your time. Why were you so sure of yours that you were willing to murder others to safeguard it?*

As John Calvin, I reckon what thou has proposed is a matter of grave significance. Indeed, there hath been much controversy and discord surrounding the interpretation of Holy Scripture and the pure doctrine of Christianity.

*No ideas are worth treating others unjustly. But rest assured, there will be no Hell for you, for there is no such place. Nor do I believe in God, let alone in Christ. But if there is a God, it will be too loving to have created such an evil place.*

Human friend, let us not be carried away by passions or impetuous judgments but reason together with sobriety. Thy assertions strike at the very heart of Christian doctrine which is revealed to us through the Holy Scriptures—a revelation I held and continue, in this discourse, to hold as divine and infallible.

There you have it. I allowed Calvin the last word, who, even as an AI, clings to his unsound beliefs with absolute certainty. He does make a good point about events of the past being understood within the frame of their age. As Jaun Enriquez writes in his book, *Right Wrong: How Technology Transforms our Ethics*, “as things get better, ethics change across time, most of us now hold ourselves, and others, to higher standards, and somehow we expect our ancestors to have lived up to our newly enlightened benchmarks.”<sup>1</sup> It is usually wrong to judge those of the past by today's ethical standards, and certainly wrong to try to now right those wrongs by erasing the past from the history books, as the Taliban did in 2001 by blowing up two 6<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist statues; as was the destruction of dozens of historic places of worship by the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria, and Libya during 2014 and 2015.

Today, the acolytes of a new secular religion on the extreme Left, whom John McWhorter calls “the Elect” and Andrew Doyle calls the “new Puritans,” are quick to condemn anyone

from the past that does not meet their own moral ideals, and often engage in pulling down their statues and monuments; ridding schools and institutions of their names and banning their books from schools and libraries, including figures like Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Mark Twain, to name a few. So, I can agree with Calvin on this point, but I do not agree that murder and violence against those he disagreed with on theological grounds was justified in his day any more than it is in ours. The ethic of “Thy shall not kill” goes back a long time, as does the universal Golden Rule, “Do not to others what you would not want done to yourself,” as it has most often been expressed.

Even if Calvin’s dogmatism convinced him that killing Servetus was the right thing to do, I’m quite sure Servetus knew it was wrong, as did the millions of people killed in the religious wars and persecutions following the Reformation. And it is this kind of intolerance that gives religion a bad name in the minds of many. The history of murder, persecution, inquisition, imprisonment, discrimination, book banning and burning, leaves us to wonder, as John Adams once did, if “This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it,” or as John Lennon sang, “Imagine there's no countries | It isn't hard to do | Nothing to kill or die for | And no religion, too.”

Given its past and present, which seems to have resulted in far more intolerance and violence than any good, many of us imagine how much better the world might be without religion altogether. My response to such sentiments is, I get it, but religion will remain with us so long as humanity exists. Secondly, I don’t believe religion is the cause of these terrible things, but these terrible things are the cause of religion. So, ridding ourselves of religion, even if we could, will not stop the terrible things. We need to concentrate, instead, on ridding the world of such cruelty and intolerance.

To my first point, that religion shall always be with us: Bertrand Russell once said, “A complete philosopher will have a conception of the ends to which life should be devoted, and will be in this sense religious.”<sup>2</sup> I think we can extrapolate from this that anyone who has a deep belief about the meaning of life and is committed to it is “in this sense religious.” One’s purpose in life may be no more than spending every opportunity to improve at golf, or to stay healthy and fit through diet and exercise, or to experience the beauty of the great outdoors, or to properly caring for and raising one’s children. The ideas that one is most devoted to may not be theological at all, but entirely secular. I’ve already mentioned the secular religion of wokeness that authors like McWhorter and Doyle refer to as “The Elect,” and the “new puritanism,” religious terms. I’m reading a book now by Steven Hassan entitled, “The Cult of Trump,” suggesting many of his followers do so with a kind of religious devotion.

Today, in North Korea, which is officially an atheist state, Juche is a political and ideological system emphasizing self-reliance that has many religious qualities, including rituals and the quasi-worship of the Kim dynasty. State Shinto was Japan’s official religion before and during World War II. It was a way of life and moral code intertwined with national identity rather than a faith in the supernatural, while promoting a nationalist ideology that supported the state and its Emperor’s divine status. Communism, particularly in Russia under Soviet influence also functioned as a secular religion that had sacred texts (like the writings Marx and Lennen), rituals (like May Day parades and the veneration of national leaders), and moral laws, all while demanding devotion to the state, all while being officially atheistic and

often suppressing traditional religious practices. Confucianism in China and East Asia is another philosophical and ethical system officially held by the state at various periods in history that has nothing to do with spiritual or theological beliefs. Here in the west, Secular Humanism is another philosophical system that fulfills the roles of religion by providing community and ethical guidelines while rejecting dependence upon the supernatural. And I won't even go into the secular songs, symbols, mythologies, and ideals that are meant to instill in us a religious-like reverence and devotion for our country.

So, by simply ridding the world of theological sects and beliefs will not necessarily rid it of religion, nor the fervor and fanaticism that often goes along with it. Secular religions can also be authoritarian, intolerant, and violent. So long as there are people who will devote much of their lives to some cause or ideology, be it ideas and passions exclusive to themselves, or the beliefs passed on to them from their families and community, or those forced upon them by the state or Church, religion shall remain part of our lives. The real question, then, is what should we devote our lives to with all our hearts, souls, and minds?

Those of us here are likely devoted to our Unitarian values, or what I like to call our liberal religious values. As Unitarians, or religious liberals, we seek to live in a way that respects the dignity of others and that promotes human welfare and individual freedom. We strive to rise above our differences and to create an entire world that is diverse and tolerant. We want justice, equal rights, world peace, and to live in harmony with nature and our planet.

This is why I prefer to call what I am devoted to—Unitarianism—my religion, because when I speak of these values, they stir something within me that is deeply meaningful and moving. When it formally began in 16<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe, Unitarianism had all the earmarks of what most of us today think of as religion. Granted it was considered a heretical religion by the like of Calvin and other Reformers, along with the Catholics, but its followers still believed in God, and in Jesus, and in the Bible, and Baptism, and much else that remains associated with Christianity. And this remains true of Eastern European Unitarianism today.

Here in the west, however, it has gone through several metamorphoses over the past two centuries, landing us where we are today, with a version of Unitarianism that is not bound or defined by any specific theological ideas. Some of us may believe in God, or gods, but this is not necessarily the case, nor is belief or disbelief in God required to be a Unitarian.

This is an unusual place to find ourselves because, particularly here in the West, most people believe one's religion is defined by what one believes about God, by one's theology. When asking about one's religion we ask, "What do you believe?" not, "What do you do?" We are asking, that is, for one's theological beliefs. Just a few weeks ago, after I told a young man that I'm an atheist, as are several of us, he suggested that we need to remove the word "church" from our name since we cannot be a church without believing in God. But it doesn't take much effort to grasp that there are many religions, including major world religions, that are not bound by any theological beliefs. Taoism, for example, is about living in harmony with the Universe, but doesn't say anything about God. Hinduism has a plethora of deities in its mythology but is far more about the practice of Karma and Dharma than devotion to any of them. Buddhism, another major religion, isn't about a belief in God, nor even worshipping Buddha, but about following his Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

These are what we call nontheistic religions and they have been around a lot longer than the western definition of religion that's tied to theology. As theologian Karen Armstrong explains in her book, *The Great Transformation*, when today's great religious traditions were born during the Axial Age three thousand years ago, "Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece,"<sup>3</sup> as well as what she calls their "latter-day flowerings ... Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,"<sup>4</sup> they all emerged in response to injustice and concern for the oppressed. "What mattered," in the beginning, Armstrong says, "was not what you believed, but how you behaved."<sup>5</sup> Religion wasn't about belief in a particular god, but a belief in justice for all beings. So, what has become our nontheistic religion, Unitarianism, is much more akin to what religion was originally meant to be about.

It is sad how foreign this understanding of religion sounds to us today. But it is not unusual for words to come to eventually mean the very opposite of what they were originally about. The historical Jesus, for example, having been born without a father, would have been ill-considered and ill-treated in his society. Yet, upon his baptism, he immediately realized that he too is a child of God. And that was the good news he tried to bring to everyone, especially the outcasts—the unclean, the demonized, the foreigners, women, and non-Jews—that they too, all of us, are children of God. Yet, after his ideas became popular and were coopted by Gentiles like Paul and, later, the Roman Empire, it became a religion about "God's only son," the very opposite of what Jesus said. As social psychologist Erich Fromm says, "'Christianity, which had been the religion of a community of equal brothers, without hierarchy or bureaucracy, became 'the Church,' the reflected image of the absolute monarchy of the Roman Empire."<sup>6</sup>

Just as Christianity came to reflect the very opposite of Jesus' teachings, religion itself has come to represent the very opposite of what it is supposed to be about: establishing and keeping a just and peaceful society, no matter what anyone believes. This is why even our Eastern European Unitarian forbears were the first to establish a religious tolerance law dating back to 1568. The etymology of the word religion itself reveals this essential meaning. The root of *religion* is the Latin *ligare*, which is also the root of *ligament*. It translates into English as "bind" or "join." So re-ligion is about rejoining or reconnecting what has become separated. Religion, therefore, is the opposite of segregation, exclusion, and the punishment and persecution of outcasts and outsiders. Again, as Armstrong explains, "Nearly all the Axial sages realized that you could not confine your benevolence to your own people: your concern must somehow extend to the entire world."<sup>7</sup>

Today, tragically, Unitarianism is itself being transformed by the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association into its opposite by becoming an institution that in the name of its self-serving idea of justice and righteousness—like Calvin—has become entirely intolerant of dissenting views, to the point of ostracizing, demonizing, and punishing those who hold them, as Calvin did to Servetus. Their new framing of our religion has nothing to do with joining people together through our common humanity but is based upon the very practice of segregating people upon racial and other lines of identity. As Andrew Doyle so succinctly says in *The New Puritans*, "The perverse end point of identity politics—whether that be on the identitarian left or the racist far right—is segregation."<sup>8</sup>

All of this is why I still prefer to call myself religious and consider myself part of a religion. This is so, not only because I think my understanding of these terms more accurately reflects their true meaning, but because what mostly stands for religion today cannot be left unchallenged. Those of us devoted to Unitarianism's historic values and ideals, whether we call them freedom, reason, tolerance, and human dignity, as I like to, or place them in a lengthier list of well-developed principles, are driven to show humanity what we consider is a better way of sharing and being together in this world.

Today, it often feels like the whole world is falling apart. Nobody wants to do what is necessary to get along long enough to address our common challenges. Political divisions are becoming more extreme all the time, as is legislative gridlock, and society itself is increasingly segregating into identity groups and ideological sects seeking only their own interests, even at the expense of others. We're breaking apart when the world is desperate for us to come together more than ever.

I believe this is our mustard-seed-sized religion's heaviest burden and its greatest promise, because coming together by agreeing to tolerate our differences, so we can live together in peace and work together to overcome our common challenges, is what our religion is all about and what any religion is supposed to be about. But let's not quibble over what words we use. If religion leaves a bad taste in your mouth, spit it out and find something tastier. What matters now is that we roll up our sleeves, join one another in our common purpose, and get to work, because, whatever we call it, the world needs its Unitarians.

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<sup>1</sup> Enriquez, Juan, *Right Wrong: How Technology Transforms our Ethics*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2020, p. 2f.

<sup>2</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Art of Philosophizing*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1968, p. 34.

<sup>3 5</sup> Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2006, p. xii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5 7</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Dogma of Christ*, A Fawcett Premier Book, Greenwich, CT, 1955, 1963, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Armstrong, *ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Doyle, Andrew. *The New Puritans: How the Religion of Social Justice Captured the Western World* (p. 46). Little, Brown Book Group. Kindle Edition.