"Religious in a Modern Key"
*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*
*at the First Parish in Wayland, MA*
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Tomorrow marks the one-year anniversary of my ordination as a minister. Becoming a minister was not always my plan. As I approached college graduation, I had an inkling that being a minister might indeed be a good direction for me to go. But there was one problem: *religion*. I felt that being *religious* would mean that I had to follow a certain set of beliefs, sign-on to a set of doctrines, and, quite simply, follow a bunch of rules about how I would or would not behave.

I know that I'm not alone in my religious skepticism. More and more people in the U.S. and around the world are seeking to create some distance between themselves and religion. According to a 2012 Pew survey, "one fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today. . . . In the last 5 years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults."

Among this group of the religiously unaffiliated, one-in-five claim to be "spiritual but not religious." A widely recognized identification, I suspect that some of you have or do identify as "spiritual but not religious." The combination of the "spiritual but not religious" identification, the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, and the decreasing rates of church attendance concern many religious leaders. Even among Unitarian Universalists, I have heard efforts both to analyze the trends as well as to rebut the "spiritual but not religious" idea. You may have thought this sermon would be a similar kind of critical defense. Well, it is . . . and it is *not*. I promise that I will end with a kind of defense of religion, but first I want to convey why I think it's understandable that so many people are—to borrow a phrase from the band R.E.M.—losing their religion.

In seminary, one of my favorite professors was a sociologist of religion, Richard Fenn. As a sociologist, Fenn was trained to attend to the dynamics within a social system in as objective a manner as possible. Sociologists, like pollsters, seek to track the dynamics of what is happening in a given society. Is the average age for first marriage rising or lowering? Is the rate of income inequality increasing or falling? In such questions, the objective is to measure and analyze societal dynamics without judging whether or not the shifts and changes are "good" or "bad."

While there is a certainly a right time and place for value judgments, I also find this sociological approach to simply notice the shifts and changes to be important as well. One


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of the key questions Dr. Fenn taught me to ask was: "under what conditions would x occur?" In other words, what conditions or system of social dynamics would foster the creation of a particular situation or set of behavior?

Let me be clear, I do not think that all of human behavior is fatalistically determined by context. I do think we have a "free will" in a significant sense. Nonetheless, I also believe that our actions are significantly impacted by the contexts in which we find ourselves. For example, you might ask "under what conditions is it likely that people will turn on their windshield wipers in their car?" Social scientists could do field research to measure the use of windshield wipers and other environmental factors to identify a likely set of conditions. Most likely, of course, they would discover people turn on their windshield wipers when it is raining or snowing.

What, do you think, are the conditions that are leading more people to choose to be religiously unaffiliated, to identify as "spiritual but not religious"? I'd like to suggest that in our modern world there may indeed be a problem with religion and being religious. Maybe those who are opting out of religion are doing so for reasonable, even good, reasons.

The Pew survey also states that the unaffiliated have mixed views of churches and other religious organizations. It states:

> "A majority [of the unaffiliated] agree that religious organizations strengthen community bonds and play an important role in helping the poor and needy. But most also say that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics. The unaffiliated also are more skeptical than others in the general public of the idea that churches and other houses of worship contribute to solving important social problems, and the notion that religious organizations protect and strengthen morality in society."

So to the unaffiliated, religious organizations *do* help contribute some good to the world, but maybe not quite as much as they think they do.

Despite the rise of the unaffiliated, in many ways, religion saturates our society. In the news, we see too often how religious conviction is used to justify hate and violence—from bloody wars that cross national boundaries to the owner of a pizza shop in Indiana who refused to cater same-sex weddings. Looking back historically, we learn how religion has been a significant factor in wars, pogroms, and all manner of hate and discrimination. It is not terribly difficult to build a case that religion has indeed contributed to suffering and even death in our shared world.


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Put this way, who wouldn't want to walk away from religion?!

Of course one response to all the bad attributed to religion would be to recount all the good that religion has brought to the world—the charity, the compassion, the community as well as legacies of learning, libraries, and sacred music. Yet, what would be the scale or who would be the judge to weigh all the evidence for and against religion? And, do you stop at measuring religion as a whole, or should we attempt to judge each religious tradition independently—trying to measure what's the "better" religion: Buddhism or Islam; Hinduism or Christianity; Neo-Pagans or Mormons? And what if we could in fact reach some kind of qualitative judgment about the so-called better and worse religions. How would we respond? Would there be some kind of UN sanctioned global effort to outlaw some religions while promoting others?

Clearly, I'm skeptical of this kind of approach to weigh, measure, and analyze the relative merit and worthiness of religion. No one of us is in a position to make those kind of universal judgments about religion in the world. And yet, often each of us do make judgments about the role of religion—or a specific religious tradition—from the experience of religion we've had in our own lives or seen in the lives of those around us.

In our own lives, we have sat in churches or synagogues, temples or meditation rooms. We have walked around Walden Pond or sat quietly in our living room admiring the dust dancing in a sunbeam. Walking through life with its new loves and heartbreaking deaths, with its moments of abundant joy and disorienting loss, we measure the messages we've received from religion against our experiences. We weigh religious insights against our need to make sense of the world. And too often for too many, religious answers are coming up short.

When I was a child, there was no Internet. I know...that makes me *old* to the youth in the service today! For institutions like schools and religious organizations, there was no weekly email blast sent to everyone with a push of a button. To avoid the hassle and cost of stamps and envelopes, the church I grew up in had a free-standing wall of cubbyholes in the lobby. Each family had a cubby with their name on it. This wall of cubbyholes functioned as a kind of in-house mail system to communicate to the people in the congregation.

When I began to question the received religion of my childhood as a young adult, this image of the wall of cubbyholes became an important metaphor. Those cubbyholes represented all the concepts, ideas, and stories of the religion that I had received. As I learned more about the world or had new experiences of life, I would try to make sense of them in the terms I had been given as a child. In essence, I would try to figure out which cubby each


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new feeling or idea, desire or opinion fit into. Finding the right cubby to fit my expanding knowledge and life experience became increasingly harder and harder. Do I really put the Hindu children into the cubby marked "hell" because they are not Christian? Does the electric excitement I feel when I embrace my boyfriend really go into the cubby marked "lust" in the section labeled "sin"? In my mind's eye, I stood there in front of this free-standing wall of cubbies feeling more and more confused and overwhelmed. And then, I realized, I could just walk around the wall of cubbies. I could just stop trying to fit everything into those cubbies and walk away.

Of course, the process of leaving behind my childhood faith was not so simple as the metaphor suggests. I didn't know what would be behind that wall of cubbies. I still didn't know how to make sense of the world around me. But I no longer had to keep trying to stuff my experiences into ill-fitted categories and labels, concepts and stories.

Because of this experience, I have a lasting sensitivity to religious concepts and words that attempt to contain and limit the experience of life. I am impatient with religious jargon that has become untethered from everyday life. Confronted with such religious jargon, sometimes I try to reconnect the word to life by building a bridge of words and illustrations. For example, I have tried to make the words of our covenant more relevant by preaching on its various words and phrases over the last several months.

Yet, sometimes, religious jargon feels too crowded with meaning to allow for a reworking. Sometimes, religion feels too overgrown with centuries of certainty and conviction to be worth any attempts to prune. It may seem easier to just walk away from religion and its deadened debates. And for some, they would toss a match into the overgrown tangle and let it all burn.

We live in a religion-saturated society. Yet, too often religious experience has been one of irrelevance or even actual physical or psychological harm. And so I do not disparage those who walk away from religion. Under what conditions would there be a rise in those unaffiliated with a religion? Perhaps under the conditions where religion does not seem to be necessary, relevant, or even good.

I say all of this standing before you as a newly ordained minister. Clearly, I have not given up on religion. Because you are sitting here today, at some level you've not given up entirely either.

I believe we're here today because as human beings we have spiritual needs. We need to be reminded of what matters in life. We need to feel connected to something larger than our over-full or too-empty calendar. We long to belong to a sense of meaning and purpose that


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grounds us and gives moral shape to our lives. We need the time and space to ask questions about the hard stuff in life—how to handle the death of someone close to us; how to love someone who also disappoints us; how to keep on going when you're feeling hopeless. We also need the time and space to be reminded of the beauty and goodness of life—the magnificent show of mutual support to pull of a *huge* Rummage Sale; the sound of the choir or the congregation singing; the bittersweet celebration of the life of someone we've loved.

Under what conditions would you seek to have your spiritual needs met here in a religious organization? Under what conditions would you seek to have your spiritual needs met elsewhere—for example on a walk outside with a friend or during meditation in a yoga class? We seek places where we might have our spirits filled, our sense of connection and life restored. And, like William Blake's "Little Vagabond", I think sometimes people find someplace other than the church better meets their needs.

What I like about Blake's poem is that he makes two related moves. First, he suggests that another place—the Ale-house—is a more "healthy, pleasant, and warm" than the church. In other words, there is a place where he'd rather be than church. A place where, in fact, he feels he would be of better use, find more meaning and purpose. Blake then questions why the church could not be more like the Ale-house. Why can't the church be a place of great happiness and singing with souls that are "regaled", reinvigorated with a sense of well-being? Such a shift, he suggests, would be good not only for himself, but also for the minister and even for God.

I believe that we can—and we must—keep asking in what ways our church, our religious life, is meeting the spiritual needs of people and in what ways it may not be. For millennia, religious life has been the structure by which people have sought to meet their spiritual needs. As Unitarian Universalists, we are part of a liberal tradition that seeks to keep exploring how to connect religious expression and contemporary society in meaningful and relevant ways.

What might it mean concretely to make religion more relevant? I think it means all kinds of things. It means that we embrace the findings of modern science in how we understand the cosmos and the climate. It means that we recognize that we live in a global world with a great plurality of people, cultures, and religions that calls for interreligious respect and understanding. It means that we may need to adapt a range of communication tools from Facebook to a stamped envelope in order to communicate with each other. It means that sometimes we sing Mozart and sometimes we sing "Lean on Me" from the Teal hymnal supplement.


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I don't have all the answers about how to continue to make religion relevant. But I do think Unitarian Universalism with its openness to listen to culture has a very good chance of finding some of those answers. My hope for us at First Parish in Wayland is that we intentionally explore how we might do this—for the sake of those here today, as well as for all those unaffiliated people who may be looking for how to be religious in a modern way.

So may it be.
Amen.


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