

“An Anthropologist’s Spiritual Journey”  
 Sermon presented to Westminster Church  
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When I started participating at Westminster in 1974-75 I had some serious reservations about many elements of our doctrine and liturgy. Remember Groucho Marx’s famous comment, that he wouldn’t want to join an organization that would have him as a member – I joined Westminster and I have been content here *because* it would have a person such as me, not only as a member, but as an ordained Elder. I was discussing theological and anthropological issues with some members of a large fundamentalist church yesterday, including the senior pastor and his wife, and – just let me say, I’m quite sure that this sermon would not be acceptable to a great many other churches! I’m going to give you some highlights of my journey from -- how shall I express it -- skepticism to realization. I hope you will find this very condensed version of my story interesting and maybe even helpful. I know that others of the Westminster family share at least parts of it.

My profession as anthropologist has been a primary factor in my spiritual journey. I have been an anthropologist for nearly 40 years, and it’s been my experience that the label evokes many different images in people, from Margaret Mead to Louis Leakey to Indiana Jones; but one image that is not often associated with my profession is church-goer – even less often, clergy. One of my happier duties in the recent past was to speak at the service of ordination to the Presbyterian ministry of my colleague in the Anthropology Department at the University at Buffalo, Dr. Joyce Sirianni, in 1999. I am a cultural anthropologist, interested in the beliefs, behaviors and products of our species. Joyce, who is now pastor of Faith United Presbyterian Church in Kenmore, is a distinguished physical anthropologist – among other heretical topics, like the fact that people are primates, she teaches the principles of evolution! And in my remarks at her ordination I congratulated the Presbytery of Western New York on their good sense – and not only for looking right past the evolution v. creation nonsense. Joyce, I said, will be a better pastor *because* she has an anthropologist’s perspective on humanity.

But in my case, through the cross-cultural and theoretical premises of cultural anthropology, my long experiences in other cultures first as a Peace Corps Volunteer and later as an anthropologist, and my specialization in the anthropology of religion, I developed perspectives that generated some deep skepticism about the tenets of the faith I was raised with. I will give just a few of many examples. First: I was very early impressed by the incredible strength of peoples’ religious beliefs – and I came to conclude that in many cases “belief” is a weak word, because it implies the possibility of an opposite, like unbelief or disbelief; a better word is conviction, even certainty. There are many members of all faiths for whom their doctrines are absolutely true, so true that there is no opposite. I state firmly in my classes that religious conviction is the most powerful conscious motivator of behavior. I cite lots of examples, but we need consider only the current trend of Islamic martyrdom through suicide bombing, as evidence. So, all religions are true; is one more true than the others? Why?

Another example: We regard polytheism as a belief in many gods and monotheism as a belief in just one. My more than 6 years in Nigeria working among

many different traditional cultures gave me insight into another distinction: in polytheistic systems, people actively worship just a few of the gods, but they acknowledge the validity of the others. Polytheistic peoples therefore are instilled with an inherent tolerance toward other beliefs. The Abrahamic faiths, however, the so-called “great monotheistic traditions,” not only profess one god, but emphatically deny the validity of any others – and this absolutism invests their more conservative followers with an inherent *intolerance* toward other faiths. Further, we should note, to be a good Christian -- or Muslim -- means not only the certainty that your faith is the only true one, but that you are compelled to convert adherents of other faiths, using that same argument – telling them that their beliefs are false. These attitudes and behaviors are demonstrably unhealthy in today’s world.

Another example: I came to realize that many elements of belief claimed as unique by particular faiths are, in fact, widespread. My tradition never claimed the Bible to be literal truth, and I always regarded Scriptures to be written by inspired people; but my studies in anthropology and folklore revealed that many Bible stories have parallels in the sacred histories of many other faiths. Moreover, many miraculous acts attributed to culture heroes are found in different traditions around the world; including magical transformations – like the contests between Moses and the Egyptian magicians, or turning water into wine – or into beer, as in some African traditions; parting river waters, stopping the sun, healing, walking on water – or flying over it, etc.

Some features of religious belief are universal to all peoples; and, in fact, religions everywhere set down the same basic social values for their people. And the fact of the universality of many cultural elements both demonstrates how people respond to common social problems, and suggests that the roots of some features of religion may be inherent in the species – indeed, in the evolutionary biology of the species. Understanding certain neuro-biological processes, for example, offers an explanation for experiences that religious people consider evidence of supernatural presence, like visions or voices. Strong emotion can alter perception; grief, for example, can generate hallucinations of departed loved ones – confirming beliefs in ghosts.

And, I could not understand how Christians, echoing the teachings of Jesus, could argue so strongly for forgiveness and inclusiveness – and yet people who consider themselves good Christians are the most adamant supporters of the death penalty and among the most stubbornly opposed to homosexuality.

I was baptized at age 1 month by my great-grandfather, my father’s maternal grandfather, who was for more than 30 years minister of a large Congregational church in New Haven. My childhood idea of God was typical, I think. I prayed “Now I lay me down to sleep” on my knees each night before bed, and our family recited a formulaic grace before meals. In the Western Massachusetts town where I was raised I attended Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, at both the local Congregational and Episcopal churches, depending, I think, on where my friends were. God saw and knew absolutely everything; He was easily pleased, but He could be stern and vindictive. He punished by withholding; really, God and Santa Claus were of the same sort. I accepted most childhood beliefs, though I think I was always skeptical about the Easter Bunny, and I was pretty sure that my Mom and Dad stood in for the Tooth Fairy. I went to a secondary school that required attendance at two religious services every Sunday. In

college I “went inactive,” as we said, and remained unaffiliated with any church until I moved to Buffalo with a small son in 1973-74 and learned about Westminster.

But my critical thinking about religious belief began early. One event that has stayed with me occurred in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade: the teacher asked the class, “Who can tell us why most trees, bushes, and grass, are green?” A girl answered, “Because green is easier on the eyes.” The teacher said that was right, and praised her. To me there was something wrong in this answer, but I didn’t know what; I retained this memory until I entered graduate school to study anthropology, when I could understand what was wrong about it; but I also came realize that that girl’s answer succinctly stated a fundamental premise of Western religious cosmology: humanity is at the center of creation, nature was created for mankind, and he is master over it. My first-hand study of traditional African religions revealed no such arrogance; and a fundamental feature of traditional religions throughout the world, is that people are integral parts of nature, and all parts of the cosmos are interconnected in a very delicate balance – so delicate that anti-social human behavior, even just negative thoughts, can upset things.

I came to Westminster through the Early Childhood Programs – as many families did! And I quickly found here some real support for my ego – people who attended offerings of the Adult Education Committee were genuinely interested in my anthropological insights. I joined that committee and was active in it throughout the seventies. And I pledged to the Church and attended services regularly. But for some years I felt that I couldn’t join the Church. I couldn’t say the Apostles’ Creed. I was silent during the Prayer of Confession. In those early years I did not take communion. I felt hypocritical, and I didn’t like that feeling. It was a painful quandary, because I was so welcomed by Westminster. So I sought help.

I had a memorable meeting with a distinguished senior pastor of a large Buffalo church. Parts of our conversation are indelible in my memory. I explained my quandary, and said, “I can’t say the Apostles’ Creed.”

He responded, “Yeah, I have trouble with that, too.”

I was encouraged. “I’m not sure I believe in the divinity of Jesus.”

He said, “I’m not sure I do, either.”

Now I was shocked. I pressed on: “I’m not sure I believe in God.”

He responded easily, “I’m not sure I do either.”

I lost it. Frustrated, I asked, “Well, what do you believe?” And his answer has stayed with me, and it has proven to be truly prophetic:

“I believe in the Holy Spirit.” I was about to say something like “Aw, come on!” but he continued... “and I believe the Holy Spirit is working between you and me, right now.”

In my explorations into the anthropology of religion, I had been strongly influenced by two features of society. The first was through the writings of Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist and author of the influential *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, in 1915. Using anthropological data, Durkheim had concluded that the sacred is a social idea, and that religious structures and sentiments are projections of social ones. In my cross-cultural studies I found near-perfect correlations between social and religious elements in traditional societies at all levels of complexity – and, moreover,

strong correlations between religious conceptions and people's relations with their ecology -- confirming Durkheim's hypothesis.

The second strong influence in the development of my thinking is the phenomenon of sociality, the innate drive to be social. Psychology has long known the health benefits of close social relationships at all stages in life; neuroscience has now conclusively shown that sociality is rooted in our evolutionary biology. I came to regard sociality as the most powerful subconscious motivator of human behavior.

That pastor's thoughts about the Holy Spirit operating between people who are struggling together to resolve some problem helped me to resolve many of my doctrinal and liturgical issues. "We gather together," as the great Thanksgiving hymn begins; and that's the point, we have assembled for a common purpose. Isolation and the lone quest for enlightenment may be important in the journey of an individual, as for mystics, shamans, and seminarians; but for me, religion experienced alone is of little use. The true fulfillment of the spiritual journey is in its social applications. The meaning of the word for our central ritual, communion, conveys the essence of sharing, of fellowship. And, after all, aren't social living and social works at the very heart of biblical teachings, both Old and New Testament? I selected our two scripture readings to illustrate this point, the first about the importance of kinship, the second about wider social relationships.

I was able to apply symbolic and metaphorical interpretations to much of our liturgy, in what I think is in the best traditions of both cultural anthropology and liberal progressive Protestantism – that's a whole separate sermon! And in 1979 I committed myself to formal membership in Westminster, and ten years later I accepted the invitation to ordination as an Elder.

But to conclude, I must go back again, to tell you about a very important incident in my spiritual journey: about two years after that memorable pastoral meeting I was diagnosed with alcoholism, and I went away to a 28-day in-patient program to restructure my life, and learn a routine of recovery and sobriety. There were perhaps three hundred patients there, of many economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds, all working together toward the same goal. Whenever and wherever they gathered, in formal sessions or relaxed informal chats, a sense of earnest purposefulness was tangible, and contagious. The first two weeks were hard; the second week was downright brutal. Late in my third week I had what I recognized later was a religious experience, a conversion experience, a born-again experience, an epiphany. I had just entered one of our plenary sessions. I was one of the last to enter, nearly all patients were already seated in the large assembly hall. A wave of profound feeling came over me. No single word can describe it: was a sense of enlightenment, achievement, completeness, clarity, understanding.

That event occurred in June 1980, 25 years ago, and throughout my subsequent, successful recovery I have looked back on it as a key turning point. Alcoholism is a terrible addiction, a devastating disease, which forever has defied medical treatment. The amazing success of therapeutic programs like AA is due to their emphasis on social cooperation. Recovering alcoholics universally agree that little miracles occur daily in AA meetings, and that when people gather together to address a common problem, they generate a real, tangible, effective power which energizes all members of the group.

In a minute we will sing an old hymn, whose words are nearly 200 years old. First, let's listen to its words:

Blest be the ties that bind Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds Is like to that above.  
Before our Father's throne We pour our ardent prayers;  
We share each other's woes, Each other's burdens bear,  
And often for each other flows The sympathizing tear.  
When we are called to part It gives us inward pain,  
But we shall still be joined in heart, And hope to meet again.

Amen.