

Are Your Religious Beliefs Making You CRAZY!?

A Message Presented to the Unitarian Universalists of Fallston

by

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Are your religious beliefs making you crazy? Just talking about religious belief systems and how they impact mental health may in itself be a task which renders you insane.

When I ran a rescue mission for men, there were many residents clinically diagnosed with various forms of mental illness, including psychoses, addictions and severe depression. And some were also devoutly religious expressing great faith or fear in God. Some even claimed that their faiths had kept them from killing themselves or others. All of these men were struggling with their own personal sense of mortality and trying to come to grips with the painful mysteries of the universe. These were not dumb drunks or bums as some would put it. Many had been professionals, were veterans of wars and the armed forces, and family men who were just trying to deal with their collapsing house of cards which were their lives.

The notion of mystery, which is truly at the heart of religious thought, is often perplexing and, as Stephen Hawking asks, "Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing? When the magnitude of the mystery of our own galaxy in which we live is beyond comprehension, how do we even begin to imagine what our place is in the vastness of the entire universe?" Isaac Asimov said, "Scientific knowledge has fractal properties; that no matter how much we learn, whatever is left, however small it may seem, is just as infinitely complex as the whole was to start with.

For me, science is sort of like describing an apple by continually cutting it into infinitely smaller pieces, examining each piece, but never tasting it. While science investigates the knowable; philosophy, metaphysics, spirituality and religion look to experience and be an active part of the transcendent and the unknowable.

The word "religion" is broadly defined and means different things on the philosophy spectrum. If you spend most of your time and energy gathering financial resources and making money, than your religion may be the worship of the almighty dollar.

If your life is dedicated to the acquisition of bigger and brighter things than perhaps your gods are named Gucci, BMW, or Versace. If the acquisition of power or control defines the purpose of your life your god may be your political affiliations. And if you are consumed by guilt or fear for your own personal salvation and the need to always get it right with the divine being than your god may even be called God, Allah, or Jesus Christ. Even we socially-minded Unitarian-Universalists can get so wrapped up in a god of intellectualism and utilitarianism, that we hardly have time to take a bite out of that big sweet apple. We work too hard, we think too much, we're so active and busy that we may lose sight of the big picture and the most essential questions of being.

Jacob Bronowski, in his book "The Ascent of Man" spoke of unhealthy religion when he stood before the ashes of his relatives at the Auschwitz crematorium. He said, "This is how men behave when they believe they have absolute knowledge." People seek simple answers and absolute knowledge, but anyone or any religion that claims absolute knowledge or absolute and infallible religious sources and tells people what to think, is a clear carrier and manifestation of unhealthy religion. It is a world-wide disease, a cancer that might eventually kill humanity."

Is healthy religion an oxymoron or is it achievable in one's life? You may be surprised to discover that what you believe and the manner in which you practice your religion may be more a function of your personality. The literal, dogmatic religious posturing of a fundamentalist, for example, may actually be a manifestation of an authoritarian close-mind. While this type of personality is found in all religions, it is most common and powerful in monotheistic religions. It may result in militant and extremist viewpoints leading to distorted cult worship the likes we've seen in Nazism, the Islamic fundamentalism of ISIS, and the Christian fundamentalism manifested in the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups.

The manipulation and mind-control methods of fear, guilt, and shame, used on people to secure allegiance, membership and group consensus, violates the very essence of the meaning of true faith and healthy religion. Certain attributes of a healthy personality produce healthy religion, and healthy religion in turn may promote a healthy personality. Religion must not be seen simply as a repository of verifiable truth. It is not truth in any knowable or quantitative sense as in scientific truth. It should be seen as humanity's search for personal meaning in an incomprehensible and often hostile universe.

When speaking of religion we should distinguish between two types of religion. There is religion which can be described as that which is devoted to the worship of a deity. This deity may have a variety of names and characteristics, some of which we normally see as beneficent, holy, loving, creative but also

destructive, jealous and vindictive. This type of religion is usually institutionalized and has expressed beliefs, dogma, doctrine, law, and creedal statements. Then there is religion that is defined by one who lives in the mysterious universe in a state of surrender, awe and wonder.

Religion as simply worship and obedience seeks to meet the human need to understand and control life. It seeks to provide a solid social context for belonging. It keeps communities together and provides structure and law. It also seeks to allay the fears of life and death and creates metaphors for describing the mysteries of the universe. And these laws are often codified in holy books and administered through the auspices of special teachers or a priestly class.

So, how do you know if your religious beliefs are healthy or if they make you CRAZY!? Walter Kania, in his book, *Healthy Religion*, presents some “what if” questions for you to consider.

1. What if your God were so loving, forgiving, and nonjudgmental that you could let go of your fear of dying and your destiny after death? What would your religion be like?
2. What if you lived in the consciousness of an eternal spirit having a human experience rather than being a human being “having” a spiritual experience? What would your religion be like?
3. What if people passing as experts about God, life, and religion simply convinced you that you were unworthy, sinful, in need of salvation and redemption, and had you engage in all manner of rituals, and behaviors to be saved. What if these experts kept you fearful and obedient and promised you a pass into eternal life if you followed what they told you to believe and do. What would your religion be like?
4. What if you were not fearful, liked who you were, felt worthwhile, important to the universe, full of potential, love, caring, compassion, and forgiveness, and lived your life without fear or guilt? What would your religion be like?
5. What if you were to celebrate the essence of who you are, acknowledge your connectedness to all of life, and manifested love and compassion in all that you do? What would your religion be like?

The journey of the spirit is not something about what happens to us on the outside. It is all about the internal realization of who we are. It is about the true journey of the spirit. It is knowing that we are always connected, never were separated, and live in the full awareness of the sacred and the divine that is a part of who we are, in the midst of everything that we do.

Growth and control are the primary goals or motivations of some religious groups or cults, although it is never overtly explained as such. The claim that any religion makes regarding its exclusive possession of truth marks it as both deceptive and fraudulent. It is the kind of religion that makes you CRAZY.

Exclusivity, the drive to convert others, and the arrogance of presenting one's self as being the repository of truth, are all factors that identify a religion or cult as unhealthy.

We love the truth, and the truth is an intrinsic part of all authentic religions. Religions have their own approach to truth which tends to be based on individual and subjective revelation. This subjective revelation, often called mythology, is an essential part of the ancient and eternal human experience. Joseph Campbell says that myths are clues that unite the forces within us and help to identify the energies flowing out. Mythology is the organization of metaphoric images, experiences, actions, and the fulfillment of the human spirit in a given culture at a given time. Myth is for sure more real than reality. It is more real than science, since science only explains the detailed nature of things in time and space in relationship to other things in time and space. Myth is all about the present human experience and the essential relationships between spiritual beings. It is truly timeless and not a part of recorded history.

One's ability to know truth is always distorted, colored, and experienced through the subjectivity of the persons we are, our unique perceptions and past experiences. Genesis, the Exodus of the Hebrews, and even the resurrection of Jesus as the Christ must only be interpreted as essential mythology in a timeless reality of the eternal now.

True religion is authentic. Just as tomatoes and bananas are authentic fruits, by definition, each manifests its own fruitness in its own unique and special way and each is as sane and peaceful as it can be, not even thinking or having the knowledge that it is a tomato or a banana. It just expresses its intrinsic fruitness and goes about its business without a thought. The Buddhists call it "suchness." Oh, but we humans, we have such glorious minds, vibrating in magnificent organic machines we call brains. When we are fragmented, ego-invested, and dualistic in our thinking, our belief systems become ossified and concrete. And we become insane, CRAZY.

When we are threatened from the outside and feel that our cherished beliefs are under attack we invite the possibility of the creation of a vacuum in our lives, of actually having no beliefs and no support for our myriad convictions, or our spiritual house of cards. Raising questions about our religion can generate a state of anxiety and fear. What do you mean God didn't create the world in six days? The words are right here. God said it, I believe it, and that settles that. It is like we have bought into a religion partly based on fear and we have been led to believe that it is hazardous to abandon that religious belief. But a closed system of belief will always keep us trapped, defensive, and arrogant.

Closed systems, by definition, will keep us mentally ill prisoners in our unhealthy religions. But a realization and acknowledgment of that madness can actually be very useful and lead us to healing and openness.

Jesus said the truth will make you free. And all he is saying is that you must recognize your own madness, fear, anxiety and realize that your existence – your suchness – is your essential being, your fruitness. Jesus also said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. All you have to do is die to yourself. Get crucified.

Let's face it, it's hard to get rid of your religious baggage when we've had it for years and it was given to you as a family heirloom. It is your earthly identity. If reading holy scripture, or meditating, or doing yoga, or feeding the poor, or simply wiping a baby's behind helps you to recognize your madness, that is a very good thing. Healthy religion is an effort to assist people in taking personal responsibility for their own spiritual journeys. No institution, religious system, or set of ancient doctrine can do that for you. And when you realize your emptiness and your madness you may recognize your true reality and your suchness.

Jesus' words in the Beatitudes are full of this "blessed recognition" of illness and emptiness and that only through recognition of this condition can one attain spiritual enlightenment or salvation. You've got to be empty; you've got to mourn; you've got to be submissive and pliable; you've got to be hungry. You've got to realize your nakedness and your loss of identity. You've got to lose your mind. You've got to stop thinking and separating yourself from reality.

Throw away your baggage and tear down your damned temple. When you've done all this you will become as new born babies and only then can you experience true being, which is just another word for salvation. And salvation, heaven, the Kingdom of God, are just other words for whole healthy spirit.

Most religious systems are two-edged swords. They possess the structure and power to guide, support and care for those on their spiritual journeys, but they also have the power to control souls and to keep people eternally locked in their bubbles of insanity. Truly caring religious systems burst those bubbles. Isn't it sad how so many religious institutions actually keep people trapped within their bubbles of insanity, which is just another word for hell? And hell is simply the concretization and repetition of your life's negative experiences, a place where you're stuck, the wasteland. In hell, you are so bound to yourself that grace cannot enter.

Because your personal enlightenment, salvation, healing, nirvana, fruitness, is your essential being, only you can decide how you want to burst your bubble. Perhaps you need to consciously consider the following questions:

1. Am I willing to consider new evidence about everything I think and know to be true?
2. Am I willing to see and examine what I know and also consider other ways of believing or expressing my faith?
3. Am I willing to pursue other sources of knowledge which will enrich me?
4. Am I willing to recognize that my essence and life are not under threat if I question my current religion?
5. Am I willing to acknowledge that I have nothing to fear and that I know that my seeking the truth will set me free?
6. Am I willing to acknowledge that the more I allow myself to expand and grow, the deeper and richer will be my religious and spiritual experience?
7. Am I willing to take that essential inner journey and that no person, system, institution, or religion has the right to determine, limit, control, or exercise power or authority over my journey?
8. Am I willing to take personal responsibility for what I think and believe, what I do, and for the ultimate outcome of all that happens to me?

So, what is the grand purpose of this ultimate personal journey, this existential and essential exercise? Well, it is your life isn't it? I guess it would be a lot easier to live in the bubble of self-deception and not wrestle with this thing called Being, God, or Divine Spirit. Perhaps there really is no need to wrestle at all, that's what the Tao Teh King says, but we westerners really do like a good fight and we don't feel we've accomplished much until we've sweated or bled a little. On my own spiritual journey, I find myself like the patriarch Jacob, wrestling with the angel and demanding that God bless me. So, God continues to bless me and he challenges me: to simply be human and live with authenticity, purpose, and meaning; to respond to the inscrutable universe with wonder and awe rather than with analysis and control, and to live more honestly and with compassion.

Perhaps we can become both knowledgeable and wise. To have knowledge means that we are in the possession of existential information about our universe. That's where science is so very important. To have wisdom is to have the understanding of knowledge at its deepest level and the beneficial use of that knowledge for the benefit of our fellow spiritual travelers who live upon this planet. Our ultimate goal in the pursuit of healthy religion is to become both knowledgeable, wise and perhaps a little crazy, too.