

THE COMPELLING QUESTIONS RELIGIONS SET OUT TO ANSWER

a lifespan faith development program
by Reverend Preston Moore
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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INTRODUCTION

Good morning. When I was in the fourth grade, I came home one day and told my mother I had to write a report for school about Asia. She said, hmmm, isn't that a pretty broad topic? I said, yeah, but there are three of us working on it. It kind of feels like that this morning. "What is religion?" is a very broad topic, but there are about forty of us here working on it, so we'll be fine.

Religion is about the possibility of transformation. By transformation, I mean a change so radical that you find yourself looking at your life from a fundamentally different point of view. The aim of this transformation is not happiness, which is really just the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. Rather, it's about fulfillment – a sense of expressing what and who you authentically are. It's about moving toward destiny instead of being manacled to fate.

That doesn't mean religion will transform your life for you. You have to do that, because transformation is about becoming the authors of your own individual and collective stories. What religion can do is provide some conceptual and linguistic tools for moving toward this transformative shift, some understandings of what makes the world and humans tick; and how to structure your individual and community life accordingly.

We're going to go through the eight questions on your handout in thirty minutes. With so little time and such a big subject, it will be an aerial view. Afterward, you may feel like you know less than you did when we started. This is part of discovering how large the territory called religion really is. Along the way, I'll suggest some possible answers to these questions. Don't get too caught up in whether you agree with my answers – just use them to understand the questions better.

1. What is the nature of reality (a question about materiality, spirituality, and mystery)

The impulse to seek out religion usually arises from a sense of something missing in life. So where might we look for what's missing? We live in a finite world, bounded by time and space. But, at this late date in human history, I'm ready to say that if what was missing could be found by looking in the finite world using conventional methods of investigation, we would have found it by now. So, where else is there to look? The only place outside the finite world would be an infinite world or domain. But what the heck is that? We're into our first question: what is the nature of reality?

Right away, we run into a problem trying to define this infinite domain. To define something means to put boundaries around it. The very nature of the infinite domain, however, is that it can't be fenced in. This is what makes it infinite, in contrast to the finite world. You can't HAVE finite without infinite, any more than you can have black without white. So even though we can't define the infinite, we can conceive of it.

Some people have no interest in the infinite. They say that unless something can be proven with scientific evidence, it isn't real and doesn't affect us. This is a materialist view of human life. Other people have very particularized ideas about the infinite, including a personal God who causes miracles, who intervenes in history, who sends people to a heaven or a hell.

Theologically, there isn't much to say about either of these two perspectives. Putting them both to one side, most religions speak of what lies beyond the finite as spiritual, which is also hard to define. I would call spirit a kind of energy to which we sometimes feel connected. In the midst of all the brokenness and trouble in the world, something shifts. We feel a positive connection with others, with nature, and with the whole given world. There is a stillness within us. Even with all of their imperfections, things are as they should be, and WE are as WE should be. This sense comes and goes. Religion is about strengthening it.

2. How do we know what we know? (a question about reality and evidence)

So how do we sense spirit? This is our second question, how do we know what we know? We know spirit in a different way from the way we know the finite material world. Talking about spirituality, Albert Einstein described it as "a sense of the ultimate and fundamental ends" of human life. "They come into being," – these ultimate and fundamental ends, he said -- "not through demonstration but through revelation. . . . One must not attempt to justify [or prove] them, but rather, to sense their nature simply and clearly." Spirit is not detectable by our physical senses, so we describe it as beyond the finite but accessible to us in time and space – if we can tune in to it.

Some of you have had this experience of connection to spirit at least occasionally. Some of you may never have. I believe we all have this capacity. It's a matter of what brings it forth. Religion is concerned with cultivating this tuning in.

Religion is also about theology, which involves thinking and communicating with others about the spiritual meaning of life. The transformative power of any theology lies in the value of the conversations it makes possible.

[INDICATING ISLAND DIAGRAM] Here is the best metaphor I can offer you for what theologians do: a finite island of understanding surrounded by an infinite sea of mystery. As theologians, we dredge up more solid ground at the water's edge and expand the perimeter of our understanding of the spiritual meaning of life. Occasionally the sea pushes back, washing away what we've built and leaving us with less understanding. And then, we start dredging and building again. No matter how much we expand our finite island of understanding, the infinite sea of mystery doesn't get any smaller. Infinity minus anything is still infinity.

Now, a physicist came up with this metaphor. He was talking about scientists working at the water's edge – as shown in the diagram I just handed out. They're working to understand the material meaning of life. Theology and religion, like science, are also forms of understanding. They're not just a matter of personal taste.

3. What is the nature of humans? (a question about ego, emotion, character, the transpersonal self, consciousness, and choice)

Theologians are interested in whatever elements of human nature str relevant to transformation. This is our third question. An important element is relationality. The communitarian school of thought is that human identity has a strong relational element, and that even the individualistic part of it is formed in community. The individualistic school of thought views community as a kind of joint stock company to be entered into warily by free-standing individuals, for the sake of certain very limited advantages.

I believe human nature is both communitarian and individualistic. The communitarian side is profoundly present in what many would call the soul. I use the term deep self -- the place within us below all the personal particulars. You can call it the place where our connection to spirit is made, or the place where spirit dwells within us. Obviously it's not a physical place, because the deep self is spiritual, rather than material.

The individualistic side of human nature is reflected in what I would call character, which is also part of deep self. By character, I don't mean virtues like honesty, integrity, and the like. I mean the eccentric, authentic personhood embedded in each of us.

Character comes from Greek words that mean an engraved mark. Character is inscribed on each of us before birth, as fate. Character sets up the human drama of unchangeable fate and creative choice. We can't change our character, but we can use it creatively to fashion a fulfilling destiny.

The individual and communitarian sides of our nature are both involved in two human capacities particularly relevant to transformation.

The first is consciousness. This is not simply thinking, which is processing information and concepts. Consciousness is more of a state of being. It is a "being with" things -- sensing or noticing them – one's thoughts, other people, and the world. At its best, this sensing has a quality of exacting truthfulness to it. Whatever is being sensed or noticed is seen completely, with nothing left out and nothing added in -- no distortions of its true nature.

Consciousness is the foundation for the other key capacity: authenticity. Authenticity is the expression of consciousness into the doingness of human living, so as to bring forth a person's true self into the world. When this happens, it is transformative.

4. What is the ultimate value in our lives? (a question about authority and ethics)

We use these capacities to arrive at values, which are simply qualities or conditions that we consider supportive of a good life. They enable us to make good choices. This is the subject of our fourth question.

From a secular perspective, values are usually based on “enlightened self-interest” or “mutual advantage.” This assumes that there is no spiritual commonality among individuals. The key values in secular society are order and civility. I’m using these two words as a shorthand for a range of social goods, including education, social safety net, and others.

From a spiritual perspective, values reflect a transformative purpose, not just order and civility. A framework of spiritual values has one and only one ultimate value, which is like the apex of a pyramid. If there were more than one ultimate value, there would no way to resolve conflicts among values. Life often requires us to choose between competing values. This always involves relating those values to a single higher value and deciding which one serves that higher value better in a given situation.

The ultimate value in a spiritual framework can’t be compromised with other values. Rather, it is what is used to make the compromises or choices among the lesser values.

A useful example of an ultimate spiritual value is wholeness, which I believe actually is the ultimate value in most religions, whatever language they use. A capsule definition of wholeness, is to be a part of, rather than apart from, all with which we belong. My list of what all human beings belong with includes (1) our own selves; (2) other people; (3) nature; and (4) spirit – or however you talk about the infinite. With wholeness as the ultimate value, we can look at subordinate values and mediate them appropriately. To take a pairing of competing values that we focused on a few minutes ago – individualism and communitarianism – we can ask, what particular blending of these will move our lives toward wholeness?

From a secular perspective, people have values. From a spiritual perspective, it is as if the values have the people. People “belong to” their values in the sense that they devote themselves to those values – but not in a belittling way. Devoting oneself to a system of values ordered by an uppermost value is life-enlarging and ennobling.

5. What are our purposes? (a question about expression of the transpersonal self and individual character into the world)

In a religious life, one important way values are pursued is by listening for a “calling.” This is a purpose in life that you keep feeling pulled toward, even when your practical side is saying “forget those daydreams. You have a mortgage to worry about.” When a person finds her calling, an elevated sense of wholeness comes with it. There is a profound sense of belonging – of having discovered why you are here.

Calling is not just for special people, like prophets or mythic heroes. It’s for everyone, but the world doesn’t realize that. So the radical idea of pursuing a “calling” could actually get you into trouble. But then, the point of religion is not to stay out of trouble; it’s to get into the right kind of trouble.

Deep self has a strong urge to express both the communitarian and individualistic sides of its spiritual nature into the world. I would say that every person is called to a journey toward wholeness, and is called to with an individualistic role expressive of his character. To live out this calling, a person's ego needs to get involved. Ego is a word that sometimes means grandiose or selfish; but I'm using it in the sense of being a kind of operations manager for human life.

Ego begins life in a state of forgetfulness and disconnection from deep self – and thus from calling. Ego senses this disconnection as an undefined yearning for something missing. It may embark on all manner of outward pilgrimages in search of that missing something. But the yearning can't be satisfied that way. It's coming from deep self, which is disturbing our emotions and ego in order to break into the world. Only when ego connects with deep self will the yearning be satisfied.

This connection causes ego to realize that deep self, not ego, is the rightful source of direction in life. With this realization, spiritual calling and values can be placed above the management of material existence. This opens a person to a transformative experience of authenticity and wholeness. Ego is included in this experience. It's still an operations manager, but now it has the noble role of managing toward authentic self-expression, instead of its old job of just problem-solving its way through life.

Even so, ego will still have doubts about calling. Deep self will always be certain about it. The only question that matters here is which part of you is in charge of your values and calling.

6. What blocks the realization of our purposes, and what overcomes that block? (a question about wounding and healing, forgiveness and spiritual growth)

Even if ego and deep self are working cooperatively, obstacles arise. This is the subject of our sixth question. Spiritual wounds are the obstacles. They block the expression of deep self into the world and disrupt our journey toward wholeness. A spiritual wound damages our connection to deep self, to others, to nature, or to the spiritual domain. Some spiritual wounds are so painful that the immediate coping response is simply to lose consciousness -- a kind of self-administered anesthesia. But our material lives go on; so this condition of unconsciousness turns living into a kind of sleepwalking. When we sleepwalk, we run into other people and wound them. Wound begets wound. Things start to snowball.

Inflicting a spiritual wound wounds the wounder. If I am a part of the rest of humanity, to hurt someone else hurts me too. No one realizes this at the moment of wounding – if he did, he wouldn't do whatever causes the wounding; but at a deeper level, this knowledge is there.

Ancient religions recognized that we can become disconnected from our good nature by being wounded. They called this disconnection sin. The word sin actually comes down to us from the Saxon word “sund,” from which we get our archaic English word “sunder”. At weddings, you've heard “what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” To sunder something is to sever its parts violently, inflicting a wound.

Now, the list-making tendencies of certain churches eventually gave us the Seven Deadly Sins and the laws John Calvin tacked up all over Geneva, trying to stamp out sin. He was a lawyer, by the way. But none of that altered the reality that sin is a condition of disconnection and sleepwalking.

Healing is a process of reintegrating what has been sundered. I have another diagram to try to make clear how this works. [DISTRIBUTE WOUNDING/HEALING DIAGRAM] Unlike physical wounds, spiritual ones don't actually heal. Rather, what we call healing is actually spiritual growth, which comes through an enlargement of the self. This renders the wound less significant. The wounds become part of a reintegration of Self, rather than something to be erased.

I believe the most important agents of spiritual growth are love and truth-telling, which move a person toward wholeness. Love is a posture or attitude toward the world, rather than an emotion. It's based on the willingness to see and accept the truth in others and to be seen and accepted by others for the truth in us.

Loving those who wounded us requires forgiveness. Forgiveness requires letting go of the yearning to make it as if the wound never happened. But it did, and it can't be undone. If we can't get to this letting go, the heart will remain closed. The wound will begin to consume and corrupt the person who can't forgive. As the theologian Stephen Mitchell observes, "a corrupted, [unforgiving] heart is like a room cluttered with valuable possessions, in which the owner sits behind a locked door, with a loaded gun." Sounds grim, doesn't it?

7. What do our deaths mean? (a question about the meaning of time)

So we're going along, pursuing values, listening for a calling, dealing with wounds and healing and forgiveness. What else do we need to succeed at this religion business? Just one more thing: death. Rainer Maria Rilke has said, the job of poets is "to confirm confidence toward death out of the deepest delights and glories of life; to make death, who never was a stranger, more distinct and palpable again as the silent knowing participant in everything alive." What strange talk. What did he mean?

I believe he meant that to try to ignore death eclipses our capacity to experience the preciousness of life. Without that experience, we can't move toward wholeness. Our seventh question, "what do our deaths mean?" is about experiencing our lives as finite. Think of how you treat something that has no deadline. (Funny, that word deadline) To include death in life means to live as if there is always an ultimate "deadline" on the horizon – because there is. We know death will come. If we include death in our consciousness we can appreciate being alive as a precious, perishable gift.

Doing this focuses our attention on the question, do our lives matter? Not just for the fleeting few moments we're onstage, but rather, in a way that is lasting. If having a life that matters means having a life that is valuable, where do we get the value?

We can't begin to find out where we get the value without an experience of mortality. If we lived forever, life would be like playing tennis with the net down. In that kind of game, nothing matters.

When we do get some purchase on what makes our life valuable – for example, by becoming aware of what we believe the ultimate value in life should be – we can effectively serve that value only if we appreciate the preciousness of what we have to give: our lives. We might actually be called upon to “give our lives” for a cherished value by dying in a burst of sacrifice. I say, if there is nothing in your life worth dying for, there's a serious question about whether there's anything worth living for. Because living for something and dying for it are just two sides of the same coin.

The largest and noblest life is not a deathless one, but rather, one that includes death, that “silent, knowing participant in everything alive” of which Rilke spoke.

8. What practices will enable us to find the best answers to the foregoing questions and live in a way that reflects those answers? (a question about religion and spiritual practice)

Now, all of this is pretty conceptual. How do we get down to the level of daily living? This is our eighth question, and it's about the practical side of religion. The word “religion” comes from two Latin words -- “re,” meaning “again,” and “ligare” meaning to connect. Religion is about reconnecting with that from which we have been sundered or separated. To do this, religion pursues spiritual practices that implement everything theology has to say about reality, how do we know what we know. Human nature, values, calling, and wounding and healing – in short, the whole prior list of compelling questions.

Religion is usually practiced in a community, which I like to think of as a caravan. It moves across the desert in search of wholeness. At its leading edge, it is searching for the spiritual practices that support wholeness. When it finds some good ones, those practices become traditions. Over time, all traditions come to the end of their usefulness. They're winnowed out as new traditions are discovered.

I think the best way to convey what I'm describing as the caravan's search for the best spiritual practices is to talk about my own church. Just to take just a few examples, we have covenant groups. This suggests that, we believe that our spiritual growth will be supported by the practice of talking with one another about our spiritual quests -- particularly the parts that may be awkward or painful. We do social justice work. This suggests that we believe encounters with strangers who have committed or suffered injustice will support our and their spiritual growth. And in worship, we try to connect with spirit. This suggests that we believe in the possibility of important things that lie beyond the finite world.

In order to have deep interactions, the people in a religious caravan need some degree of shared understanding about theology and religion – not anything like consensus, but some broad overlap in understanding. For example, a caravan that includes people who believe in heaven and hell and people who are pure materialists will have great difficulty with that. They might

exchange views and increase mutual understanding, but they won't get very far with questions about what spiritual practices would move them toward wholeness, because one group doesn't believe in spirituality at all, and the other thinks getting to heaven is all that matters.

The caravan can adopt a philosophy of religious pluralism, but at some point, widening that pluralism further will make the interactions get shallower and shallower.

CONCLUSION

Thus endeth the Gospel of the Eight Questions. A lot of people in our society go to church; but I don't see many people living a religious life. What I do see is what the Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, said in this morning's reading: everyone worships something. Everyone puts some value uppermost in his life.

The critical religious question is whether that uppermost value is guiding them to a transformed life. I believe every person's deep self already knows what value should be uppermost. If there is alignment between a person's outer declaration of values and this deep inner knowledge or truth, then life moves toward transformation. If there is misalignment, then there is great suffering, which goes by the name "idolatry." That means to give the uppermost place in life to something that isn't really the uppermost value. You can worship anything – fine wine, hard drugs, money – you name it. The question, as Dr. Phil would say, is how's that workin' for you -- in terms of transformation.

We can reverse engineer our values by examining the way we live -- how we spend our time and money, what our priorities are. What I've tried provide today is a very short, high-level sketch of a much more detailed framework for doing this reverse-engineered self-assessment. If you do this, you might discover that you've actually been a pretty good theologian all along. When you make your religion explicit in this way, you can look at it and decide which pieces of it serve you well and which don't.

Some people see religion as just one more activity in their lives – along with job, family, leisure time, hobbies, civic duties, and so on. I look at it very differently -- as the perspective from which I live my life. A person who chooses to do this has placed himself in a small, willful minority of the population -- a group of people who just won't let go of what I consider to be a much grander aspiration in life. I highly recommend it.