

A MISSION BORN OF MYSTERY

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Emil Brunner suggests: “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” And a careful reading of church consultants reveals a firm belief that all powerful, growing religious institutions share three priority characteristics:

- A strong devotion to a clearly stated religious mission.
- A cadre of basic leadership committed to this mission above all else.
- An organization designed to maximize the effectiveness of this mission.

With that said, something else must be noted, namely, that nothing has been more troubling in our religious movement over the past fifty years than the notion of mission. We seem to have been confused about its definition, wondered why it was important and replaced it with less threatening substitutes. The three most popular of these substitutes have been:

- Community---while community is focal in our movement, it can also easily be nothing more than an embracing haven for frustrated liberals.
- Social Action---while social action is an imperative in our movement, it can also be nothing more than an activity that temporarily relieves the guilt of theological irrelevance.
- And, political correctness---while being politically correct is consistent with the values of our movement it can also be nothing more than a tactic that ignores experience and wisdom in favor of social posturing.

So rather than engage the challenge of clarifying our mission, we have taken the easy approach of leaving it up to each individual congregation to come up with its own definition. In other words, we have declared religious mission to be up for grabs. The end result of this approach has been continued mission confusion and the social impotence of an over-stressed diversity.

Two historical quotations underscore why clarity of mission is so important to any institution:

- Montaign observes: “No wind blows in favor of the ship without a port of destination.”
- And RF Mager avows: “If you don’t know where you are going you are liable to end up some place else.”

Our confusion about mission is reminiscent of a Hagar The Horrible cartoon. It is of a Viking boat. Some of the oarsmen are paddling with the blade of the oar and some with the handle of the oar. Some are rowing forwards and some are rowing backwards. The boat is moving in aimless circles and zigzags. And, Hagar, standing at the helm with hands cupped around his mouth, is shouting: “Will you quit saying different strokes for different folks!”

The underlying message of the cartoon captures a principle that governs all religious institutional life, that the power to move in concerted direction and to create positive social change lies in commonality and not in diversity.

Another problem related to this misbegotten stress on diversity is that when a congregation does attempt to create a mission statement, it is usually not a mission statement at all, rather, a long listing of facets of ministry created to honor diversity. Such listings also normally fail to distinguish between mission and ministry. Mission is why a congregation exists. Ministry is everything it does to fulfill this mission. The distinction is substantive.

It seems to me that there are two clues that might lead us to an accurate definition of religious mission.

The first clue is found in the type of institution for which a congregation is created. It is society that creates the institutions required to serve its needs. And the type of institution it creates defines that institution’s social mission. A governmental institution is created to serve society’s political needs. An educational institution is created to serve society’s learning needs. A financial institution is created to serve a society’s economic needs. And, a religious institution is created to serve society’s meaning needs. Strange, don’t you think, that while we never question the obvious mission of the governmental or educational or financial institution we are forever questioning the mission of the religious institution.

A second clue to an institution’s mission is the circumstance that provoked its birth. It seems obvious that the first institution society created was the community. And it was out of this first creation that all other institutional needs emerged.

It is possible that the second institutional need was what we, of the modern world, call religion. Back when we lived in caves, there was little to ponder except survival in a savage and terrifying environment. But then came art and language, howsoever primitive, and meaning making was born. Critical to this meaning making were answers to the compelling questions inherent in the mystery of their environment. So there arose an institution in the midst of community which function was to enter this mystery and return with answers that gave meaning to human existence and direction to human community. Thus, the meaning institution was born.

At first, this institution seems to have been a single person that was called by many different names. Joe, while the rest of us go out and hunt and gather, you sit on that rock over there and ponder what this whole big mess we are in is all about. And so, Joe sat on the rock and pondered and sought to create meaning.

However, given the passage of time, this pondering enterprise grew in both importance and power and was finally called religion, which means to bind together, because that is precisely what its answers did for the community. So, religion, and its answers to life's mysteries, became the holy enterprise, the sacred pursuit that infused community with a sense of meaning and purpose upon the earth.

However, as population grew and communities proliferated, so did various religions. But one thing remained the same, the purpose for which society had created religion. Thus, whether it is a Jewish Temple, an Islamic Mosque, a Catholic Church, a Southern Baptist Church or a Unitarian Universalist congregation, they all have the same mission. They all exist for the same reason, a reason created by society, itself,

What, then, distinguishes between all of these religions? Their distinctions are that they all answer life's compelling questions of mystery differently, thus, giving different meaning and direction to community living. And these differences become critical to human destiny.

So, while religion will give community meaning and direction, it is for the sake of defining purpose and not simply to satisfy the human need for community.

Nor is the purpose of religion to initiate social action programs. There was no need for social action programs when society created religion. This need only came about with the proliferation of both societies and religions and their consequent competitions.

Nor is the purpose of religion to model political correctness. Whatever political correctness was important when religion was created was already structured into community life.

Social action and political correctness are symptoms of the religious community's belief in the same way that the religious community is a symptom of its expressed mission. What religion does is define for community what issues of social action and political correctness might best serve the community's message of cultural transformation. In essence, rather than being the mission of religion, social action and political correctness are the imperative arms of the religious community serving its mission.

Here are some of the most vital of those questions which answers create a religion's message:

- WHO AM I? ---which is the question about the nature of my being.
- HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I KNOW?--- which is the question about my source of authority.
- WHO OR WHAT IS IN CHARGE?--- which is the question about my ultimate value.
- WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?---which is the question about that which informs and sustains my sense of self-worth.
- WHAT DOES MY DEATH MEAN?---

which is the question about the boundaries of time in my existence.

The answers to these compelling questions create the core of a view of reality. And out of this view of reality emerge values that create individual and community conscience that give direction to living. A religious community is a group sharing a common view of reality. It is this view of reality that transcends differences and bonds the community in mutual allegiance.

Now, if a religion dominates a culture, as Christianity has in America, then its values and language will provide the foundational meanings and directions of that culture and serve as some major part of its conscience, depending on what political myth drives the culture's existence. This is the ultimate end of all effective social action and political correctness, a consciousness raising that provokes the acceptance of an altered view of reality that consequently alters social behavior.

Flowing from this is the definition of the mission of religion. It is to transform the society in which it exists into the shape of its own view of reality and values conscience. And it does this by transforming enough of the individuals in that society into the image of its own answers to the compelling questions with the end result that its own conscience prevails.

Here, then, is another governing truth. No society is ever transformed by any social action or political correctness that is only designed to change its laws. Laws are only kept by a nation's people if their conscience subscribes to these laws. This is the singular most important lesson of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was not interested in changing laws so blacks could eat with whites at dime store lunch counters. He was interested in changing the heart of his culture so that the mingling of blacks and whites in the same eating establishment would be an irrelevant issue.

And his primary message was that if you want to change a culture's behavior in any sustainable manner, you first have to change the culture's heart that produces sustained behavior. In other words, you have to change the culture's answers to the compelling questions that are at odds with the behavior of racial respect and acceptance.

This means that the ultimate value of social action and political correctness is that they raise a society's consciousness of the need to change its behavior. But unless society is, at the same time, offered a message of transformation the society can use to change its heart, such social action and political correctness will, in finality, be futile finger in the dike activity. Have I implied that there is anything wrong with social action? Absolutely not! Acting in ways that announce the need for social change is imperative. What is wrong is holding up social action as the mission of our religious movement. What is false is not social action but making social action our reason for being. Social action is to engage in that which is noble. And we all wish to participate in nobility. Yet, that which is most noble is changing the heart of our culture so that it reflects our beliefs and values.

So, the most profound and critical agent of human transformation possessed by a religion is its answers to life's compelling questions of mystery, its view of reality. And the more committed in commonality a religion is to this message the more powerful a tool of social change it becomes. The opposite, of course, is equally true---the more diversified a religion's answers to the compelling questions, the greater is its social impotence.

So, I say again, your mission as a religious institution is individual and social transformation, a transformation that brings society into greater accord with your answers to the compelling questions of

human existence. And as a community of faith it is to model this message so that the social order can actually see its transformative power at work.

I challenge you to commit in fullness to this mission for which society created you. At the heart of this challenge will be overcoming the fear that grips us Unitarian Universalists, namely, that if we hold a common answer to anything profound we will have created a dogma and, thus, will have become like, you know, Them.

We may adore the notion of unity in diversity, however, only social impotence lies in this notion. If we wish the social power to transform then we must become enamored of the notion that diversity resides in unity. That is, unity is the singular source of both the capacity to embrace diversity and to express social power, simultaneously. Unity is the sine qua non of all constructive social power. And, if we wish to be endowed with any empowerment to transform society, then we must grasp and embody this essential truth. The key is not unity in diversity, rather, it is diversity in unity.

Fredrick May Eliot, wise leader of our past, during a period of identity confusion, admonished: "It is better to be misunderstood than to be overlooked." One definition of power is increments of attention. Being overlooked is to be bereft of power.

A few years ago, at the National Gallery of Canada, in Ottawa, I sat in the La Chappell Rideau Chapel and listened to the forty part Motet, composed in 1575 by Thomas Tavis, surrounded by forty audio speakers, eight sets of soprano, alto, tenor, baritone and base, each vocal part and each set chanting a different part, yet, every set harmonizing with all the other sets.

The power that captured one's attention was not that of eight sets devoted to a disparate cacophony of difference, rather, it was the engaging harmony of eight varied sets devoted to a blended commonality. Again, I assert that the power to engage and transform society is found in a commonality that unifies difference into synergistic wholeness.

The most recent example of this power in our religious movement, displayed itself in the nineteen thirties during that debate over the validity of the Christian anthropomorphic god. Some in our movement participated in this debate with reactive postures that distilled in theological terms such as atheism, deism and agnosticism. However a smaller group in our movement responded in a far more profound way. They creatively lifted up Humanism as an alternative theology and in a brief span of years this message brought about consequential social transformation in our entire culture. This happened for two reasons. One is that we addressed the needs of the culture with a new vision of reality. The other is that we spoke with the social power of common commitment, a common commitment that was not a totality but was a majority that compelled social attention.

It is important to point out that the dominance of and commitment to the Humanist perspective in the mid-twentieth century did not violate our member freedom to disagree or differ or to offer other theological perspectives. Quite the opposite was and remains true. It has always been out of this maintained freedom to see and believe differently that the new has arisen in our midst. Indeed, if there is hope that we might yet create a new vision of reality that addresses today's desperate need for a saving paradigm it lies in this maintained posture.

I suggest that a new paradigm is seeking to emerge in our midst. For want of a better term it might be called Spirituality. However, it has remained ill-defined and without power to provoke social change because we have failed to engage both its critical necessity and model its transformative meanings.

How exciting it would be were our annual district and national general assemblies to devote their programming to our religious reason for being...the articulation of a message of redemption for a world bent on self-destruction. How refreshing it would be to receive a copy of the UU World that devoted its space to creating a new view of reality. However, if any of these things are to actually happen then it will be because we have decided to engage the mission for which society created us rather than to play safely around its edges lest we inadvertently step on a dangerous commonality.

I was walking down the crowded hall of a hotel at a General Assembly when a woman stepped in front of me, stuck out her hand, smiled, introduced herself, and said: "You have no reason to remember me. But ten years ago I visited a Sunday service at your church. I was in a major life crisis and your sermon helped me make a decision that transformed my life. I just wanted to thank you." And with that, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Had I not been momentarily stunned by her words, I would have suggested that she write the church I was serving at that time and thank them because they had made that service possible. I was only their representative in the pulpit that day. As I later pondered her words I was, again, struck by the paradoxical nature of this business called religion. It is both an immense heaviness and an exhilarating lightness. It is both an awesome responsibility and a wonderful privilege----this mission of being the spiritual guide to the culture's heart and conscience.

We have two options. We can remain as we are at this present moment, an inert, socially impotent religious community that is gradually and inevitably headed for cultural oblivion, or, we can pick up the mantel of our mission, speak and model a message of transformation and offer redemption to a spiritually bankrupt and degenerating society.

THAT IS THE CHALLENGE AND IT IS THE ONLY ONE WORTHY OF OUR COMMITMENT!