

"TWENTY CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS MATURITY"

It is safe to assume that those who make up our Unitarian congregations have a wide variety of religious attitudes and beliefs. Some of us are humanists, some of us are theists; some of us are agnostics and some of us are devout believers. But all of us - and I think it is also safe to assume this - all of us would like to consider ourselves religiously mature men and women. Surely all of us would agree that true maturity of mind and heart and spirit is something to be desired.

If that assumption is valid, it raises some questions: what would a truly mature religious position be like? what would be its principal characteristics? How would we define or describe it?

I don't know whether anyone of us is competent to answer such questions adequately. In any case, to attempt to do so could take us the rest of the week really to do justice to them. However, I think we can at least do this: I can mention and comment on some of the major aspects and attributes of such a position, and you can reflect on my comments. So, this article is entitled "Twenty Characteristics of Religious Maturity".

I need to make two prefatory comments. First: This title is not meant to suggest that these are the only or most important characteristics of such a position. And yet, I think - hope - that you will agree that they are all major and basic attributes.

Second: If you would expect the sermons on which this article is based to last a total of about forty minutes, that will mean a characteristic every two minutes. You may not get two great sermons, but you're certainly going to get fast ones!

To begin our catalogue, let's put down as the first characteristic the necessary quality of honesty. Among other things, religion is a search for truth - whatever truth may be. It ought to be obvious, although apparently it has not always been obvious to some religious groups, that the surest way to truth is down a road marked "honesty".

Michel de Montaigne declared that "all other knowledge is hurtful to (the person) who has not honesty and good nature."

The first principle in mental health is what psychiatrists call "the reality principle". This simply means that you and I have to face the world as it is and ourselves as we are. The same thing is true of religion.

Only religion that is honest about life; only religion that prefers uncomfortable facts to comforting illusions; only religion that accepts the universe as science and sanity say it is, and not as some theologians and religionists imagine it to be: only religion of this sort is going to come near the golden goal of truth. Alexander Pope described an honest person as "the noblest work of God".

In part because it is honest, a mature religion is also healthy. This means that it is blessedly free from morbid fears of damnation, eternal punishments, hell-fire, retribution, evil spirits, and all other such dreadful nonsense.

Fears of this sort have terrorised our race from the dawn days of pre-history right down to the "enlightened" present era of fundamentalist evangelists like Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, and all their kind. The honesty of mature religion, however, has revealed a universe which is controlled by natural laws rather than supernatural forces; and so it understands that there is nothing to fear from such a universe.

Centuries ago, Cicero wrote: "I follow nature as the surest guide, and resign myself, with implicit obedience, to her sacred ordinances."

One of the black marks against a good deal of religion in the past has been the damage it has done to the human psyche and soul with all its fears and superstitions. The contrasting healthiness or freedom from fear of mature religion is a blessing for which it ought to be eternally grateful.

Too many religions have been religions of creed rather than deed: of preaching rather than practice. What a person professes to believe has been more important than what he or she actually does; the performance of particular ritual acts has taken precedence over acts of service and love. Dogmatic, creedal belief has always been the first test of such religion.

By contrast, mature religion is a lived religion. It is a way of life. It is a matter of taking the high principles which we say we believe in, and consistently applying them in our relations with all people. The test of such religion is not arbitrary beliefs, but what we do with our beliefs - and what our beliefs do with us. Just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so the proof - the test - of mature religion is in the living.

Every intelligent person recognises that there is a great deal in this world that we have to accept on faith. And faith has to play an essential part on human life: faith in ourselves; faith in other people; faith in the future; faith in the efficacy of goodwill; faith in those magnificent powers and processes that many of us identify as God.

Reinhold Niebuhr said: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope." Or, as I would say, we must be saved by faith. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of mature religion that it tends to put its primary reliance upon reason and not so much upon faith - at least in the usual popular comprehension of that term. Its authority is reasonable evidence, verifiable proof, human experience, scientific validation. Reason and common sense are its touchstones, not creedal faith and dogmatic belief. This is simply to say that mature religion is reasonable and rational; the human mind, as well as the heart, is its judgement seat.

However, let it be immediately pointed out, as we come now to our fifth characteristic, that the heart plays quite as important a role in its own way; and, in some respects, an even more important one. Pseudo-mature or pseudo-intellectual religion rather tends to disparage emotion, and fails to understand that this mysterious force is the generative blood that quickens into life the skeleton of rationality and intellectuality.

Consider how much there is in life that is emotive, non-rational, ineffable, of the spirit. Love, beauty, passion, tenderness, self-sacrifice, heroism: the qualities that we prize, and that make us more than simply animated computers, are all in the province of the heart and the spirit.

Rousseau said: "Nothing is less in our power than the heart, and far from commanding we are forced to obey it."

Knowing is important, but feeling is essential. Schleiermacher said that we know God, not through knowing, but through feeling. Although it is basically rational, mature religion is at the same time profoundly emotional. Its ideal is the thinking mind - and the loving heart. Jacques Bossnet said: "The heart has reasons that reason does not understand."

Mature religion is humanistic. Don't confuse this description with any reference to the modern ethico-religious movement known as Humanism. I am using the term "humanistic" in its classic and Renaissance sense as meaning an emphasis on human beings and the human potential, in contradistinction to the traditional orthodox emphasis on miracles, heaven and hell, and other superhuman or supernatural matters.

Jean Rostand declared: "One must either take interest in the human situation or else parade before the void."

Mature religion does not require any rejection of the idea of God. However, it is more likely to be concerned with people, with society, and with the human condition than with theology for the sake of theology.

Mahatma Gandhi said that we must arrange our physical and cultural circumstances so that they do not hinder us in our service of humanity, on which all our energies should be concentrated.

In this splendid Greek and Renaissance sense that we serve God best by refining, perfecting and serving humanity, mature religion is humanistic.

Mature religion is also free and untrammelled. That is to say, it is not bound by tradition, geography, culture or race. Truly eclectic, it can take of the best of all religions. Truly universal, it can span the seven seas and be embraced by thinking men and women everywhere.

More than one sage has remarked that there exists in this world a sort of unrecognised universal religion - that is, a set of high moral principles and a devotion to them on the part of intelligent people in every time and place. It may be something like this undeclared universal religion that is at the heart of the freedom of mature religion.

Thomas Carlyle commented that "the Universe is but one vast symbol of God.

And yet - while it is free and universal, mature religion is also traditional to the extent that it almost certainly has roots in some particular religious faith. After all, religions are like people. People don't just happen; they grow out of a particular background with an heredity all their own, and with values and ideas conditioned by their ancestral past. For example: the religious position of people like Gandhi, Schweitzer and Einstein was certainly a universal one, and yet it is significant that Gandhi thought of himself as a Hindu, Schweitzer thought of himself as a Christian, and Einstein thought of himself as a Jew.

Gandhi wrote: "I am no indiscriminate worshipper of all that goes under the name of ancient. I never hesitated to endeavour to demolish all that is evil or immoral, no matter how ancient it may be, but with that reservation I must confess to you that I am an adorer of ancient institutions, and it hurts me to think that people in their rush for everything modern despise all their ancient traditions and ignore them in their lives."

To the extent that it recognises its own heritage, and finds values and satisfaction in that heritage, mature religion may be said to be traditional.

It is also responsible. It recognises that, if anything is going to be done about conditions in this world; if there is going to be any real progress and any real improvement: humanity will have to do the job. No prayers, however pious, no ritual sacrifice, however costly, will persuade a supernatural God to intervene and solve our problems for us.

Harry Emerson Fosdick declared: "On its highest level (the human) contemporary desire to escape responsibility expresses itself not in emphasis on luck or in emotional submission to fate, but in a thorough-going deterministic theory, ascribing all personal qualities to heredity and environment."

So, mature religion encourages people to assume responsibility for their own welfare, assuring them as it does so that they are capable of handling the job; that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people. Dependency, and a desire to have other people assume responsibilities for us, are always hallmarks of immaturity. Independence, and a willingness to assume responsibilities ourselves, are always characteristics of maturity.

In Fritz Kunkel's words: "To be mature means to face, and not evade, every fresh crisis that comes."

Science tells us that ours is an evolving universe. Biology tells us that the first law of life is growth. Psychology tells us that the penalty for failing to grow and develop is infantilism and idiocy.

Because it understands how imperative is this matter of growth, mature religion never lets itself become fixated by creeds, doctrines or dogmas. Always it grows with our increasing knowledge of the world. It is willing to accept today's truth, even though this means giving up the cherished, comfortable truths of yesterday. The secret of progress is evolution, and mature religion is continually growing and evolving to ever higher stages of understanding and enlightenment.

Twentieth-century British Unitarian minister Derek Stirman wrote: "Over the years, and over the centuries of human life on earth; through the many changes in culture, the development of nations, the growth and even the decay of civilizations and religions, - time upon time that which was once the highest good known has been cast aside. Though the good of some past was useful and beautiful in its day, to a later age it stands only as an idol, a false god. The false gods must go in order that new goodness may be allowed to grow."

Mature religion has a social consciousness and concern. It is one of the qualities that may lift it above the level of other religions. With the exception of Judaism and Confucianism, the other great religions have not, at least in the past, had a sufficient concern for social problems and human welfare. The religions of the East have tended to be very personal, perhaps escapist, especially Hinduism. Orthodox Christianity too often has been concerned with theological niceties and other-worldly matters, to the disparagement of the present, real-life social situation.

Mature religion is vitally interested in the world around it, and in improving that world. Race relations, economic conditions, social problems, international affairs: such things are of critical importance to it. Believing as it does in heaven here-and-now rather than elsewhere-and-later, and also feeling as it does a deep sense of obligation to individual human beings, mature religion works ceaselessly at the great social problem of building a finer and fairer world.

Gandhi declared that "what the vast mass of (hu)mankind does for self or at best for family, a social servant does for general good."

Much of the progress in this world has been made by a few men and women - or perhaps a movement - who have had the courage, the fortitude, to go out on the frontiers of life and fight for some new position which is almost certain to be controversial: human rights, women's suffrage, civil liberties, racial equality, the freedom-to-choose and anti-creationist struggles, the nuclear threat, the abolition of slavery and child labour.

Confucius said that "to see what is right and not to do it, is want of courage."

The appalling number of social and religious pioneers who have suffered persecution, torture and death is both saddening and inspiring. It is saddening in that people - especially people in positions of power - are so often afraid of the new and the more enlightened. And it is inspiring in the realisation that there are men and women who are willing to fight and suffer and even die for what they believe is right. That takes courage, and we can "never be certain of our courage till we have faced danger". (Duc Francois de La Rochefoucauld)

Standing out in advance of the crowd, mature religion must have courage. It must have courage simply to survive.

Still another characteristic of mature religion is the fact that it is essentially humble. Confucius described humility as "the solid foundation of all the virtues."

Just as it knows that truth is an evolving and ever-changing reality, so mature religion recognises that it does not have a monopoly on truth. It does not claim any kind of infallibility. It is sincerely, even passionately, dedicated to what it believes, but it does not insist that its beliefs are the whole or the final answer. Jacob Klatzkin wrote: "Humility is a state of mind appropriate to perception of the truth of things. A soul that has not attained humility is not prepared to grasp the truth of the world in its fullness."

Many of the convictions of people one thousand, two thousand, three thousand years ago seem immature or foolish to us today. So, many of our beliefs and convictions, even the ones we think are the most advanced and sophisticated, are going to seem naive and foolish to people a few hundred and certainly a couple of thousand years from now.

In Tryon Edwards' words: "True humility is not an abject, grovelling, self-despising spirit; it is but a right estimate of ourselves as God sees us."

As it is humble, so mature religion is also comprehending or understanding. Sir Richard Steele said that he knew "of no evil so great as the abuse of the understanding, and yet there is no one vice more common."

Religions have always wrapped their dearest truths in a mantle of legend, allegory and parable. They have done this because they have intuitively understood that, while there are many truths that can be expressed directly - such as Two and two make four - still there are many other truths that have to be suggested, implied, or otherwise conveyed through symbol and metaphor.

"There is," said Charles Franklin Kettering, "a great difference between knowing a thing and understanding it. You can know a lot about something and not really understand it."

A truly mature religion does not believe that all myth is necessarily untruth and humbug. Instead, it knows that myth, symbol, fantasy and folklore can often be still another avenue to truth - and a very illuminating and revealing avenue!

For these and many other reasons, mature religion is broadly tolerant. And tolerance has been described as "the only real test of civilisation". (Sir Arthur Helps)

Tolerance says: This woman over here is a Buddhist. Fine! She should be the best kind of Buddhist she can be, true to and living by the immortal principles of the great Gautama. It says: That man over there is a Jew. Splendid! What a superb religion Judaism is! What a heritage of tribulation and triumph! Mature religion says: I respect your beliefs and I hope you respect mine, because all roads that lead to God are good.

Phillips Brooks wrote: "We anticipate a time when the love of truth shall have come up to our love of liberty, and people shall be cordially tolerant and earnest believers both at once."

Tolerant, yes; but its sympathy and tolerance do not blind a mature religion to the realities of life. Some religions are superior to others, and certainly they are superior in particular ways. The fact that it respects the right of every religion to its own distinctive beliefs and practices does not mean that mature religion necessarily regards every other religion as its own ethical and intellectual equal.

Having a healthy respect for itself and the soundness of its own position, mature religion is not only self-confident; it is also what might be called "missionary-minded". Through the written and spoken word, it ought to carry its message to all who may be interested. Not dogmatically, and yet with a reasonable degree of conviction, it believes that its principles and philosophy offer a bright - perhaps the brightest - hope for the achievement of a truly civilised society, and so quite naturally and rightly it ought to attempt to rally people to its banner.

In recent decades, the phrase "peace of mind" has been considerably vulgarised and debased. This degradation of a noble concept is unfortunate. The finding of true peace of mind - which implies serenity, and a meaningful coming to terms with life - is another primary goal of mature religion. It is probably not so much a goal as an achievement. It has been said that "when we do not find peace within ourselves it is vain to seek for it elsewhere." (Duc Francois de La Rochefoucauld)

True peace of mind is a virtue which gradually comes into being as a man or woman lives by the principles and develops the qualities I have been talking about. For the intelligent person, the achievement of religious maturity is also likely to be the achievement of true peace of mind. It is, you might say, the peace that passes understanding.

Next in our list is a quality which might best be described as "integrative". Some people, without any real philosophy of existence, see life simply like the mixed up pieces of a gigantic jig-saw puzzle.

The mature mind does, by contrast, have some logical concept; it has some rational, systematic view of life and the universe. Of course it doesn't know all the answers. But at least it knows that there are answers; that they are, we may assume, reasonable answers; that this is a universe of order, pattern, and perhaps even purpose.

Even though it can't immediately put all of them together, the mature mind knows that the jumbled pieces of the jig-saw puzzle can collectively comprise a picture that makes sense.

So it is with religion. It is "integrative". It seeks to put pieces together, to find meaning in what may seem meaningless, to make sense out of nonsense.

Like all religions, mature religion seeks ultimate reality. Orthodox Christians and Muslims will find it, they hope, by going to heaven and seeing God face-to-face. Buddhists seek to find ultimate reality by achieving Nirvana, the cessation of attachment; Hindus by escaping the awful endless cycle of re-incarnation and being absorbed at last by Brahmin Atman.

But there are others who seek the Holy Grail by achieving a sense of rapport, relationship, oneness, at-homeness with the universe.

To feel oneself a living, vital part of a cosmic life process that goes on from everlasting to everlasting, world without end - to find and to feel this is to know a sense of peace, purpose, meaning and glory that is, for some people, the ultimate reality. One might call it the liberal equivalent of seeing and knowing God.

Carl Sandburg wrote: "Something began me and it had no beginning. Something will end me and it has no ending."

Our final characteristic might best be described as death-defying or triumphant. Immature persons are frequently - almost predictably - afraid of dying. Why? Because their minds are likely to be troubled by nightmarish fantasies of death, and because they do not have a sufficient grasp of the simple realities of life, which are: that death is a natural part of the life process; that life could not continue without death; and that when we build ourselves into the life of the world around us, in a sense we do not die but rather become a part of the ongoing stream of life itself.

Knowing all this, mature religion is triumphant religion because it has conquered humankind's darkest and most ancient fear: the fear of death.

It should be obvious that I have sketched an idealised picture of religion. No religion - not even the Unitarian faith which we hold so dear - no religion has ever yet measured up to all the standards we have been considering. And yet - this is just another reason for making an attempt.

When people have a clear idea of the goal they want to achieve, then they will be more likely to achieve it, and to do so more quickly.

A religion that is mature, in all the many implications of that word, should surely be the ultimate goal of every person who calls him/herself a religious liberal.

When a race of human beings develops on this planet capable of embracing and truly living by the sort of enlightened religious principles we have been considering, then we might be closer to achieving the dream expressed by Robert Ingersoll: "I see a world without a slave. (Hu)mankind at last is free. Nature's forces have by science been enslaved. Lightning and light, wind and wave, frost and flame have become the tireless toilers of the human race. And as I look life lengthens, joy deepens, love canopies the earth. And over all, in the bright dome, shines the eternal star of human hope."

That is a dream that may yet come true, when religion becomes what it might be, and could be, and should be.

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