

Sacred and Profane: The Utility of Religion in a Material World

Jim Fisher 07/21/25

Welcome and Centering Thought

Thank you for coming this morning, in person or online. I am Jim Fisher, born a Unitarian Universalist of New England and Midwestern stock, raised in the tidewater of Virginia. This is perhaps the ninth of my UU homes, eclipsing all others having been a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ellsworth for 25 years and counting. Please know that I am a member of a much larger team, too many to name, even if I could name them all.

We live in challenging times. As a liberal religious covenant, we are deeply troubled to see our beautiful planet despoiled, war and famine in the world and we wonder about the value of our religion. We see the beauty of charitable acts, the awe of the mountains, forests and ocean and we simply wonder.

Know that you are welcome. Amen

Prayer

In 1980 Donna and I ventured from our Peace Corps homes in Ecuador to visit high Andean towns in Peru and Bolivia. This was a grand adventure with long hikes on the Inca Road, dodgy hotels, pick pockets, riding in packed buses, and immersion in life and rituals. The then small city of Copacabana on the banks of Lake Titicaca. We had no inkling that this was the place for blessing new cars. People brought their cars, decorated with flowers to have holy water, beer and chicha sprayed on them. Catholic priests and clergymen competed for business, praying, burning incense, spraying cars, selling small statues of the Virgin Mary and other religious iconography.



Taita Salasaca, protege este carro. Cuidense la familia para que lleguen seguros y sano a sus casas. Pachamama, tenga esta cervecita y chicha para su buena bendición. Dios pagarasunke Inti, Taita.

Readings:

[Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation: Of The Principle Of Utility](#)

Chapter I

I. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.

IV. The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost. When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.

V. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.

Karl Marx, Reflections of a Young Man (1835)

If we have chosen the position in life in which we can most of all work for mankind, no burdens can bow us down, because they are sacrifices for the benefit of all; then we shall experience no petty, limited, selfish joy, but our happiness will belong to millions, our deeds will live on quietly but perpetually at work, and over our ashes will be shed the hot tears of noble people.

Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction (1843) Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Sigmund Freud Reflections on War and Death Illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead. We must therefore accept it without complaint when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality against which they are dashed to pieces.

Constitution of the State of Maine

Article I. Declaration of Rights.

Section 1. Natural rights. All people are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and of pursuing and obtaining safety and happiness.

Section 2. Power inherent in people. All power is inherent in the people; all free governments are founded in their authority and instituted for their benefit; they have therefore an unalienable and inalienable right to institute government, and to alter, reform, or totally change the same, when their safety and happiness require it.

Sermon

Today's sermon is about the utility, or value or role of religion in a materialist world.

This follows on several related, and perhaps more emotionally engaging services this month.

- Mark Worth: What did Jesus and the Apostles have to say about wealth, poverty, and our responsibilities to one another?
- Jeff Juede: Finding something to celebrate on the Fourth of July 1) the openness to examine that we are each and all connected with earth, 2) the awareness of how we are connected, 3) a reverence for that connection, and 4) practices to strengthen that connection.
- Ethan Hughes and the UUCE Justice Ministries: how across all time and cultures, certain individuals open up to love and have become a force for collective liberation and cultural change, not to mention learning three new handshakes (caterpillar, surf and punch)

Each speaker drew on great thinkers, delving into profound questions about our connection to the web of all existence and our responsibility to a peaceful and sustainable world. I hope that this morning I can add another perspective, perhaps a bit abstract, but I think helpful as we ask, "what is the role of religion in challenging times"?

I had the privilege of standing here a year ago to discuss the plight of the humanist soul. At the time we were buffeted by President Biden's imminent withdrawal from the presidential race, nine months of Israel bombing Gaza to rubble, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and a rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment in the US. That seemed like a propitious time to consider whether soul matters.

As it turns out the changes we have seen over the last 12 months, particularly the last six months, have only elevated the need for us to understand, to organize and to act. The recently enacted budget transfers wealth from the poorest of the poor to the richest of the rich. Our rural hospitals will be forced to close, our emergency response systems will fail, as they did in Texas. The program of masked people in unmarked cars beating and arresting people off the street and making them disappear has just received a dramatic increase in funding, now receiving more tax support than all other Federal law enforcement systems combined. This is an important time for us to consider the role of our religion in troubled times.

In the early 1990s I served four years directing research on treatment alternatives for alcohol and drug abuse and addiction, now called substance use disorder. We were testing a variety of social / behavioral strategies for helping individuals connect the challenges they faced across multiple dimensions of their lives with their substance use.

At the time the Dayton - Columbus region of Ohio was in the peak of the crack cocaine epidemic. That epidemic has subsided somewhat, possibly due to a comeback for opioids and synthetic opioids. Maine currently has a high incidence of opioids, but also cocaine and its derivatives.

Our research involved many lengthy interviews with people seeking treatment for drug use. We were testing ways to intervene, including Narcotics / Alcoholics Anonymous, counselling, job placement, housing assistance, mental health assistance and education and employment. On a number of occasions our clients would say, "I am a spiritual person, but I do not and will not go to church. I don't like religion." This presented a challenge our model of treatment. Our model of treatment involved engaging clients with local institutions, to integrate them into healthy, drug free communities. People that were either socially tied up in the drug using networks or people that were profoundly isolated from support networks appeared to be more likely to relapse.

Since that time I have pondered the difference between spirituality and religion. What is the utility or value of spirituality? What is the utility of religion in the lives of people, particularly people who are in very stressful circumstances?

The definitions of spirituality and religion have shifted over time. The terms spirituality and religion overlap and are often used interchangeably, currently it is safe to say that they are not centered on the same concepts. Spirituality has come to be a more individualistic concept, an individual's journey or search for the sacred. Religion has come to be a communal, even institutional framework intended to connect members, and others, with the sacred. Doctrinal religions provide mores and taboos, lists of best practices, and rituals to assist individuals in their spiritual journeys.

Our covenantal religion is a bit harder to define, but is still an institutional body that intends to help individual members on their spiritual paths.

A 2002 study found most people in the U.S. describe themselves as both religious and spiritual. One 2002 national survey found that about

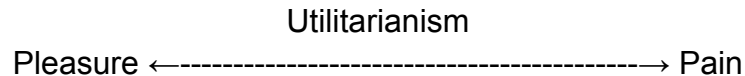
- 65% of Americans label themselves "religious and spiritual"
- 15 to 20% of Americans call themselves "spiritual but not religious"
- 5 to 10% of Americans say they are "religious but not spiritual"
- 5 to 10% of Americans say that are "neither religious nor spiritual"

Source: [Marler & Hadaway, 2002](#)

My Peruvian prayer for a car, bus or truck, is more widely practiced than we New England puritans might wish to acknowledge. Throughout the word you will find direct appeals to religion to provide a material benefit. Flowers are draped over buses and trucks throughout south Asia. Churches require funds to operate. I recall my puritan shock at attending a Catholic Church fundraiser in the midwest where sisters of the church were running gambling tables. It was all in good fun, but shocking to me. As a society we choose what is prayer-worthy. The direct appeal to religion for our private benefit is perhaps not so distant from the intensely private path of spirituality.

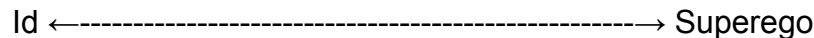
I suspect that Unitarian Universalists have struggled in the past with the relationship of spirituality and religion. Many have chosen this religion as a means to knit a more consistent connection between their individual journeys and being part of an organized body. Many of us have found in troubled times, and in good times, that this body, this religion has been helpful. But why?

I will dramatically over-simplify life's ups and downs with a simple principle that we seek pleasure and avoid pain. Jeremy Bentham, the author of my first lengthy reading, is credited with codifying a very elemental principle of utilitarian economics, that humans seek pleasure and avoid pain. A society, or nation, is thought to be doing well when the sum of all pleasure is high relative to the sum of all pain.



I will circle back to measuring pleasure and pain shortly.

You may recall from Psychology 101 or Sociology 101 another perspective on the pleasure-pain axes from Sigmund Freud. At the heart of Freud's work is the struggle of the individual animal desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, he called ID, and our internalization of society's norms, he called Superego. This superego may be a moral compass, encouraging us to conform even when this reduces pleasure or increases pain. Sounds a bit like the individual spiritual quest and the institutional boundaries that shape our journey.



Freud, it turns out, was quite influential in our understanding of large social systems, not just the interpreting psychological distress of individuals. The individual challenge of mediating between pleasure and pain can and should shape public policy. This is particularly the case where my pleasure comes at a cost to society. Examples abound. I will no doubt want a cup of coffee after the service today. You may want one right now! It is entirely possible someone late to the coffee urn will find it is empty. We cannot both drink the same coffee. For some of us, the loss is palpable. This is much more the case for people without access to food, water and other basic needs. Then there is the complex process that caused a farmer in a distant land to grow coffee rather than staple crops, for the coffee to be processed and transported from, let's say Colombia, to Ellsworth. There are many things that could have been grown, processed and transported rather than coffee.

The great thing about coffee, and most "private goods" is that we can easily assess its utility. The price is right on the can. Of course there are unintended consequences of private goods, erosion from cultivation, fossil fuels for transportation and processing, and sleep deprivation. External benefits of coffee also exist. We are more productive when we can regulate our sleep state. We are safer drivers when we are alert. Coffee is a guilty pleasure after all.

Bentham's theory, that we seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain is demonstrable with private goods, like coffee. The world is now a vast and integrated economic system that exchanges goods and services in an increasingly complicated network. Henry's friend spends part of his day working to earn 90 cents in order to ride the train to Fitchburg. The people he helps are grateful for his efforts and in the end he

is happy to arrive in Fitchburg ahead of Henry. He has chosen a more communitarian strategy, engaging with others and the wider economic system.

Henry is on a more spiritual path, finding his way through nature, enjoying his environment, finding a miraculous shortcut and arriving in Fitchburg with a basket of blackberries a little late. Two paths to Fitchburg. The societal path full of exchanges and the spiritual path, somewhat solitary, but full of awe.

I should stop here, and perhaps I will if my time is up or you have stopped already. But I still want to answer my question, what is the utility of religion? Our individual quest for truth and meaning, to be connected by grace with the sacred, is not quite as simple as walking to Fitchburg. I think Bentham, Marx and Freud all struggled, as all economists, political scientists and psychologists continue to struggle with production and distribution of “public goods”. Henry walked through a river that we hope was not polluted. He dallyed on rock walls, and meadows of blackberries. His world felt very much like a national park, an area where nature flourishes.

Public goods are not excludable or rivalrous. I can consume as much clean air as I like without compromising your ability to breathe the same air. I can enjoy the awe of seeing a beautiful mountain without using it up. My sense of security from harm does not exclude your sense of security. If we build a safe and clean environment we all benefit in the public space.

We cannot easily put a price on public goods and so our markets tend to ignore them. Current administration policies to encourage fossil fuel consumption, in fact to undermine clean energy, ignores the long-term cost of climate change. Current administration policies to privatize public lands and attached entrance fees to parks puts gates on our public assets and furthers social inequality. Our inability to access parks, to breathe clean air, to avoid the floods and fires of climate change impact us materially and spiritually.

So what is the utility of religion? Perhaps the role of religion is more than providing us with four walls in which to seek our spiritual path. Perhaps religion puts out a few guardrails to protect us from our desire for immediate pleasure at any expense. Surely there is merit in this. Religion may be an institutional body that helps us to protect the environment, to guide us on a communal path to the golden city on the hill or the blackberry patch where we can share the fruits of nature.

Let it be so.

BENEDICTION

May we each find our path to Fitchburg. We may walk through the meadow on our spiritual quest. We may work in the market place to earn our fare. We may seek blessings on our new car so that we can drive safely. No matter your route, I hope to be there to greet you with a basket of blackberries and a cup of coffee.

Go in Peace.