

A Religion for the Third Millennium
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
Rev. Dave Hunter
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Eleven o'clock, Universal Time, the second Sunday in January, 2908. Three billion people have gathered, gathered for worship. They're not, of course, literally at the same place. Most of the three billion are on earth. A hundred million or so are on the moon. Several hundred million are on Mars. With their glasses and an appropriate voice command they are all connected. For a few hundred years glasses have projected what people in the olden days used to call computer screens. As a matter of fact, a transition is underway from glasses to contact lenses with built-in computers.

They have all taken the little pill that enables them to hear the music of their choice. Some choose the composers of a different era, like Bach, Bartok, or Boulez, but most choose a more modern composer – who might well be a computer. What they see projected by their glasses might be the Grand Canyon, or one of Saturn's rings, or a hydrogen atom in slow motion, or a human baby.

What they hear, in addition to the music, is what used to be called a sermon, apparently on the third commandment. Back in olden times this commandment was "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God." [Deut. 5:11, Exod. 20:7, NRSV] The Ten Commandments have been rewritten to be positive statements rather than negative ones. The third commandment is now "You shall glory in the wonders of language and use words creatively and metaphorically."

The sermon could not be understood by someone from the 21st century – it is not in English but in the Universal Language. You can hear English words in it. You can discover grammatical structures from Arabic. You can hear the intonations of Chinese and occasional clicks from African languages. But you cannot determine whether the voice is a male voice or a female voice – or perhaps it's a computer voice.

Oh, and there's the snake. All of the worshipers have their snake companions. Some of the snakes are draped like scarves; some are sitting quietly on laps; some are wrapped around legs.

Perhaps you expect me to have calculated the exact date of the second Sunday in January, 2908. Well, I can't. You see, somewhere around the 25th or 26th century, an eighth day was added to the week. They call it *offday*, and it comes between Wednesday and Thursday.

There you have one picture, a very incomplete picture, of what the practice of religion might be like, late in the third millennium.

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Before we get to the religion that I would hope for in the decades and centuries ahead, I feel obligated to mention two other possibilities, and then I'll make a few general observations.

First, the whole planet may eventually go in the direction in which western Europe appears to be headed now – religious observance and belief may gradually decline and eventually die out. By 2908 religion may be something you read about in history books or marvel at in museums, a phenomenon of the past, thankfully left behind in more enlightened times.

Or here's another possibility. Due to global warming and a few centuries of war over diminished resources, the population has declined to its pre-industrial revolution numbers. The people are religious in what we would consider a superstitious way. Powers beyond control or understanding are felt to be in charge, and people try to gain the favor or forbearance of these powers in a variety of ways. The efficacy and propriety of human sacrifice is hotly debated.

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Here are the general observations; I'll make four of them.

First, religions have shown themselves to be very adaptable. You can certainly see this in the histories of Judaism and Christianity. Judaism survived the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. Christianity has survived the Reformation, Galileo, and Darwin. There is every reason to expect that religions will continue to adapt.

Second, I believe, that for a religion to be viable over the centuries ahead, it must be able and willing to accept the findings of science and the use of reason. A religion that denies evolution or insists on the factual accuracy of the Bible won't make it to the year 2908.

Third, I believe that for a religion to survive over the long haul, it must be able and willing to coexist with other religions, and with the possibility that one can live a meaningful and fulfilling life with no religion. Thus I would predict that a religion that insists that unless you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior you will end up in hell, to be tormented for all of eternity, perhaps not tortured, but with punishment worse than water boarding – such a religion won't make it to the year 2908.

Fourth, we don't know yet whether the intelligent life we have here on earth, such as it is, is unique to our planet, or whether it may exist elsewhere as well. It is my hope that intelligent life exists in many, many places throughout the universe. I fear for the future, if we're *it*; if all of God's eggs are in *our* basket. It is my guess, that in the next thousand years, we'll either have discovered intelligent life elsewhere, or we will have determined pretty conclusively that we are alone in this vast universe. To be viable for the long run, a religion must be able to deal with either alternative.

Let me reassure you that I don't know any more than you do what religion will be like – or whether it will still exist – in the concluding centuries of the third millennium. Indeed,

making predictions for the final decades of the 21st century is way beyond my ability. I have hopes and fears for the year we recently entered, and for the next several years and perhaps decades, but I'm as clueless as anybody else about the future. And I don't expect to be around to see how it all comes out, whatever that may mean.

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With that disclaimer I would like to present six features of the religion that I hope for, for the future, and for a religion that I believe is possible.

[1] I'll begin, first of all, with four basic religious questions. These are, as I see it, questions that science will never be able to answer. Indeed, they're mostly questions that we would not expect science to answer. But I believe that they are basic questions of human existence, and therefore I characterize them as religious questions.

The first two questions go together – they're two sides of a coin, you might say: How shall I live? and How shall I deal with the inevitability of death? I won't attempt to answer these questions this morning. I wish only to observe that they are questions that we all need to think about – to go through life without reflecting on its meaning, on its uniqueness, its responsibilities, its possibilities is like refusing to read books or to listen to music. And they are questions that won't go away – they'll still be with us in the closing centuries of this millennium. We can be informed, educated, and enlightened by others, but we are each responsible for our own answers. You can't just say "me, too" after the person sitting next to you responds.

The third question is quasi-scientific – Why is there something rather than nothing? Maybe the scientists will answer this someday. I would be overjoyed if they did, but quite surprised. I claim no scientific expertise, but it seems to me that with scientific explanations you can always ask Why?, you can always push – or try to push – to the next level. I can't imagine a scientific answer, and thus I would classify this question, Why is there something rather than nothing? as a theological question.

The answer, or the nonanswer, is a mystery, or perhaps Mystery, [*three seconds of mysterious music*] with a capital M [*three more seconds of mysterious music*], which some would call God. I would use the name *God* not as an answer to the question, not claiming that God is the creator and that settles the matter; rather, I would use "God" as an admission of our human limitations.

With the fourth basic religious question we step back from the first three questions and ask, How do we answer these questions? What is the source, to put this another way, of religious authority? I don't think a third millennium religion can simply say that our authority is the Bible, or the Koran. The Bible raises questions more than it answers them, and even if it did purport to have the answers, what could assure us that they're the right answers? I don't think there's one compelling, inevitable answer to the question of religious authority. Just as I would not expect the Bible to answer our tough questions, I'm no more satisfied with the answers *Because we've always done it that way* or *Because I said so*.

I happen to like our Unitarian Universalist approach to the question of religious authority. We find authority in the individual conscience; we find authority through the use of reason; we find authority through the collective wisdom of our religious community, as developed over the decades and centuries; we find authority in experience, that of ourselves as well as that of others. You may be wondering, What if there is conflict among these authorities, does one trump the others? We'll leave that question for another day – or, better yet, we'll leave that question as an exercise for the student.

That was the first of my six features of a religion for the third millennium. The others won't be so long and complicated.

[2] The second feature is community. The religion of the future will involve community, a community of people who look out for each other, who care for one another. We need to know the answer to the question Who will hold my hand when . . . ? – you can fill in the blank. Recently I learned of a baby – this happened in a different state, not Arkansas – who was born many weeks prematurely and died after three days. The mother had diabetes, and her life as well as that of the baby were endangered if the pregnancy continued, and the baby was delivered by caesarian. The mother survived, but the baby didn't make it. Who will hold the hands of the devastated parents? One answer, surely, is members of their congregation. They will be there – especially the caring committee and the minister – they will be there for you in time of need, when you feel that your life is shattered.

When I think of a religion that can maintain its vitality and its viability over the centuries, I don't think of isolated individuals, each with their own computer eyeglasses and their own snake. Rather, I think of congregations – congregations like this one – where people can support each other, where love can be felt.

[3] Let's look more closely at the religious community, at the congregation of the future. What binds it together?

But first an aside on megachurches. Some would argue that megachurches – congregations with five or ten thousand members, or even more – are the future. Their greater professionalism, their economies of scale, their ability to meet such a wide variety of needs will make them the model for the third millennium. They are Wal-Mart. A congregation of the size of ours is like my grandfather's grocery store.

I don't see it that way. I see the megachurches operating on the consumer model, trying to satisfy the needs of customers, offering a multiplicity of services, with a theology that is vapid, with a core that is mush. I see them as a fad that will last a few more decades and then gradually fade. Some may evolve into secular institutions, perhaps combinations of shopping centers and community centers, with entertainment possibilities. [see Frances Fitzgerald, *The New Yorker*, Dec. 3, 2007, p. 46]

This could be wishful thinking on my part. Perhaps I'd have a different view if we had a few Unitarian Universalist megachurches scattered around the country.

But what the megachurches lack, which I think is essential in a church, is a sense of commitment, of commitment for the long haul. That's what binds us together. I don't think you can get that through the consumer model. Advertisers spend billions of dollars to foster brand loyalty, and it's always precarious. We in the various communities of faith don't have billions to spend, but we do have a sense of community, binding us together, person to person, one by one. We do have institutional loyalty, binding us together with generations of Unitarians and Universalists – generations of the past, the present, and the future.

One way that religious communities bind themselves together is through creeds – statements of shared belief. But our tradition is one not of creeds but of covenants, from the Mayflower Compact of 1620 and the Cambridge Platform of 1648 to the covenant on the wall in the 4th through 6th grade classroom, downstairs. We are people of the covenant. We make promises to one another of how we will treat each other – these can be called horizontal promises. We also make vertical promises – to the congregation, to guiding principles, perhaps even to God.

And as the historical creeds of Christianity – the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, for example – grow increasingly antiquated, I see covenants as the way of the future for faiths of the third millennium. I see covenants as the third feature of the third millennium religion.

[4] A few years ago I took a course on world religions – that's one of the areas in which an aspiring UU minister must show a certain level of proficiency. Our study tended to focus on theology and doctrine and on worship and devotional practices. But I was equally interested in institutional arrangements and, specifically, money. Who paid to build and maintain the beautiful mosques of Islam? How are Buddhist monks supported financially? If you want to understand how an institution works, "follow the money" is always good advice.

So who will pay the bills for the religions of 2908? In my view, the congregation of 2908 will pay its bills the same way the congregation of 2008 does – through the financial support of its members.

I can imagine someone standing before you on the second Sunday of January in 2908, reminding you that in less than three short months you will have the opportunity – and the responsibility – to make your pledge of financial support to your congregation, asking you to consider how much your congregation means to you, referring you to giving guidelines that suggest appropriate pledge levels for people in different circumstances, inspiring you to consider tithing – taking ten percent off the top for your fellowship – and warning you not to worry about your neighbor's pledge – you are only responsible for your own.

Thus I believe that a fourth feature of religions of the third millennium is that they will be supported financially by those who are committed to them, just as our fellowship is today.

[5] The fifth feature of our hypothetical religion of future centuries is worship. I expect that people will still gather together on a regular basis for worship. Worship will have evolved, as it has in the past. I'm willing to go out on a limb and predict that worship, in 2908, will still involve music [*play first line of #114, Forward through the Ages, ST. GERTRUDE, Arthur S. Sullivan*], and that worship, in 2908, will *not* involve snakes.

I hope to explore what worship is and why we do it in a future sermon, so please stay tuned.

[6] The sixth feature is the prophetic voice. From the prophets of the Hebrew Bible – Nathan, Amos, Micah, Hosea, among others – to Martin Luther King, Jr., and contemporary voices – the prophetic voice has been part of religion. The prophet Nathan called King David to account, you may recall, when David used his position of power to exploit the beautiful Bathsheba and then to have her husband killed. [2 Sam. 11:1-12:14] Prophets today call our nation to account for waging unprovoked war, for disdaining international standards and agreements, for ignoring global warming, for abusing the poor and the oppressed.

Perhaps sometime during the third millennium we will have achieved world peace with justice. Perhaps the kingdom of God on earth will have arrived, all swords will have been beaten into plowshares, and all spears into pruning hooks [Isaiah 2:4], and the long, painful era in which the voice of the prophet was needed will have ended. But I wouldn't count on it. Let us hope and pray that each generation will have its own Nathan, its own Micah, its own Martin.

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In summary, I believe that the religion that our descendants in 2908 will have will be a good one.

- It will continue to adapt as circumstances change.
- It will accept science and be comfortable with the use of reason.
- It will be able to coexist with other religions, and
- it will have adjusted either to the discovery of intelligent life elsewhere or with the conclusion that we on this planet are unique.
- It will take basic religious questions seriously and won't seek to impose arbitrary answers.
- People of faith will continue to worship together and
- to form religious communities,
- to which they are committed, and

- which they support financially. And, finally,
- the prophetic voice will still be needed, and will still be heard.

Will our spiritual descendants in 2908 still sing “Forward Through the Ages”? I don’t know, but I hope so. Let’s sing it now, #114, “Forward Through the Ages.” [Frederick Lucian Hosmer]