

## **Evolution at the Core**

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The World Council of Religions had just finished a morning session up on the 12 floor of a major hotel as a group of distinguished clergy— a Rabbi, an Imam, a Pentecostal Christian pastor, a Buddhist Monk and a Unitarian Universalist minister-- found themselves in front of the elevator each deciding where they might go for lunch.

They all stepped into the down elevator at the same time and as the door closed; the Unitarian Universalist suggested a quick game. He explained it as a gambit which the ministerial credentialing body of his denomination used to quiz candidates for ministry, and that he had often wondered how people of other traditions might handle it. The key being to articulate their tradition in the time it took to ride an elevator a few floors.

They each agreed to play and to split up the ride to the main lobby, two floors each. After all, they were all professional clergy and religious leaders. This could be fun and certainly not too difficult.

The elevator started to slowly descend. It was an old historical building and the elevators were the same. Taking a deep breath as the elevator started down, the Imam went first.

“As a Muslim, I have an indisputable belief in Allah as the one true God and Mohammad as his prophet. And I believe in the inerrancy of the Koran. Alhamdulillah.”

Well done, they all commented and smiled seeing how easy it was to play this game.

The light indicated they had just passed the 11<sup>th</sup> floor and now approaching the 10<sup>th</sup>. The Buddhist Monk smiled and stepped forward waiting to see if some one was planning to get on at the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. As the elevator slid past it he calmly turned to the others and spoke:

“I believe in the four noble truths: life means suffering, the origin of suffering is attachment, the cessation of suffering is attainable and that there is truly a path to the cessation of suffering which we can experience in this lifetime.”

There was an appropriate silence, if for no other reason than his seemingly calm demeanor. The elevator continued to approach the 8<sup>th</sup> floor.

Just then it started to jerk a bit and everyone stopped for a moment as the next floor passed. Various Prayers were quickly mumbled while the UU minister glared at the panel to see if some emergency light had come on.

The Rabbi then spoke quite concisely: “I believe in the one God and in his messenger Moses; I believe the Jewish scriptures are historical stories recorded to give us direction in our lives. He nodded as if in prayer at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and kissed the back of the elevator and looked up with a half joking smile.

Then the Pentecostal pastor continued, and said: “We believe in the inerrancy of Scripture; that the bible is the direct word of God. We believe in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the Atonement, the physical resurrection and then depending on what flock we are sheep in, in the authenticity of the miracles, and or Christ’s imminent bodily return to the earth; all in the name of our father God, Jesus Christ Amen.” And then he too put his hand on the elevator wall.

Just then the elevator stopped, ka-plunk, and the lights sputtered on and off.

The UU minister muttered something under his breath which sounded like any number of words commonly thought of as profanity. Followed by “wouldn’t you know; now I really may have to explain who it is we are!”

As the lights stopped flickering and sort of settled back dimly, the Rabbi said to the Unitarian Universalist “I hope this isn’t a sign from above because you were about to speak” clearly in a joking tone, but the Pentecostal pastor was clearly contemplating the probable accuracy of his assessment.

Meanwhile the Buddhist was thumbing his beads and the Imam as well, who slowly rocked back and forth.

The UU minister was not quite sure where to go with this. His time line had all of a sudden become, well maybe appropriate to the question? He never really did think much of the elevator speech thing. Thought it was limiting and inauthentic in a way.

“We Believe in Evolution” He finally blurted out.

There was a long pregnant pause from the other clergy.

“That’s it, we believe in evolution, with a capitol ‘E’:

“What?..what..what...” They all replied almost in unison.

“Look you all have wonderful traditions and clear doctrine and creeds. That’s all well and great, but these beliefs you hold were all spawned in the early days of monotheism; Very old concepts. We look to the future and the changes that accompany our lives as revelation. Not every one holds to old ideas as well as others might.

It seems that defining religion solely on belief is too often limiting for those of us who have come to understand the word religion as more than a specific set of beliefs. These creeds you offer may free some, but they also imprison others. We do not believe that in order to be religious one must have a creed or dogma.

Oops, please except my apology, I’m supposed to be telling you what we believe in, not what we don’t believe.

There was a silent pause.

Everyone started to talk at once. But the UU cut in: Look, What I am saying here is that we don't have such easy or pat answers as you all do. As easy as it is for you to say what you believe, we often find it easier to say what we don't believe."

"Consider this for a moment, if Buddha never lived, would there still be a religious path for those who suffered? If Mohammed never lived, would we still have some form of Islam? If Jesus never lived, would the truth of this teaching still be relevant?"

Deep down in the human soul, what is religious? What binds us to the spiritual impulse, to our many and varied religious expressions?"

"Hmmm," said the Rabbi, well how is it you understand religion?

Well the UU minister answered; " The word religion has its roots in the Latin word "religio" which comes from another Latin word "religare" meaning to bind back, or to bind together, which in turn comes from yet another Latin word "legere" which means logic. When we look at religion as being bound back to, or together with, that which we understand by logic or experience as a truth, then religion comes alive to us. Understanding the word in this way

frees our religious and spiritual journey and allows us to grow, change and evolve. We do not need clear cut statements of belief or creed, or deity to be religious.”

The Imam cut in, in disbelief: “Then how can you preach in your church? If you don’t have a God or some mediator to the divine what do you say from the pulpit?”

The UU minister paused for a moment, then responded, “Well like any other church we speak of the nature of life and how we can enter into it as the best people we can. And in fact some of the most religious people among us are those that don’t believe in a God. But many of us do believe, and consider ourselves very spiritual. We just can’t make the claim that as a religious body “We’ all believe the same way.”

True, sometimes it feels like I’m trying to support a group of very independent cats—impossible at best! But I imagine that for you it is like that too at times?”

The Rabbi said: “You should meet some of the cats in my synagogue!”

“You do have some principles that you affirm and promote, correct?”

The Pentecostal pastor then asked, “These things you “affirm and promote,” are they beliefs?”

The UU responded, “No, they are just good sentiments. Ways we wish the world would be and some ideas of how we can remain responsive to this work. But they are not traditional statements of belief. In fact they only became a part of our bylaws in the mid 1980’s.

Actually there is an ongoing discussion in the ranks of Unitarian Universalism, among lay folk as well as clergy, as to what if anything is a core belief in our religious movement. It is a kind of inquiry that can make you dizzy if you actually consider it.”

The Buddhist offered: “Sounds like you could use a little more meditation in your life, brother!”

“Possibly.”

“So have you come up with a core that binds you as a people of faith? Something the vast majority of you would hold to?”

“Well like I said we believe in Evolution.”

The Pentecostal pastor was visibly uncomfortable with this statement.

“Consider for a moment that Unitarian Universalism is much like a working elevator, clearly not this one. It is moving through time, carrying us through out the infinite levels of life. We consider religion as a journey. It is a process that comes alive and is developed over lifetimes as we gather in community, sharing recording and interacting with each other. It speaks to the movement and to the changes in life and asks our trust in an ongoing and inherent journey towards the betterment of life and of consciousness. It is truly a religion of “EVOLUTION!”

To which the Pentecostal retorted: Do you mean like Charles Darwin! That we come from apes!”

The minister answered: “No hardly, Charles Darwin’s concept of speciation which has so challenged many folks as well as religious communities is just a piece of a much larger picture of evolution

which is not limited or directed by a particular scientific concept, such as speciation, which may or may not lose some of its prominence as new understandings expose themselves.”

The UU looked to see if the mention of exposing itself caused the Pentecostal to exhibit any uncomfortable body language. It did.

“Back to religion: everything is held in and subject to the currents of change, and growth. This is all evolution. From the idea of speciation, and diversity of life right up to the evolution of community from tribe and family groups and out to the evolution of the planet, the stars and vast unlimited galaxies. All this and more in the divine dance. This idea expresses the depth of our religious hopes and concerns and tells us that we are charged with responsibility in the trajectory of our piece of evolution.

Put into classical religious language, evolution by its nature denies that revelation is sealed, that it is still available to us, and even scripture is an ongoing expression of wisdom manifesting itself in each moment in time. This is at the core of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. It keeps us active, adaptive and religiously unique. As difficult as it is, it is also very exciting, full of mystery and surprises.”

The Pentecostal said: “So other than saying revelation is not sealed, what makes it religious?”

“OK. Let’s take some theological concepts that you are familiar with: imminence and omnipresence. Shall we agree that they speak to religious realities?”

“OK. Those are indeed core to our theology.”

“In Unitarian Universalism, Evolution, with a capital E, is a living force. It is both imminent and omnipresent. It is imminent, in that it is always there doing its work; and it is omnipresent, in that it has always been, is now, and will always be.”

The Imam responded: “Sounds like God to me.”

The UU nodded and said: “Belief in Evolution is a religious tenant as sure as any belief in God or Goddess, or any of their mediators is to others. Our experience of the interconnectedness of existence, being tied back to what we know but may not always see or understand, is a gift of evolution.”

The Buddhist then asked: “Well then, can it fix this elevator?”

The UU answered: “Not soon enough! I’m hungry. But I would bet eventually human forces working in conjunction with electrical fields and gravity will prevail.

It is true that belief in evolution does not change the problems of life. Rather it places them in a real context that does not insult or questions the gifts it has given us over time, to do the work ourselves. One gift of evolution that I appreciate the most and works well with my experience of life, as well as elevators, is our ability to think and understand what we think about, and then act on it.

You know, one of the scientists who uncovered the double helix, in the properties of DNA said:

“DNA, as a chemical compound, made this mind of ours. Then this mind eventually came to understand DNA. So what happened here? DNA evolved to understand itself!”

“We can perceive evolution in its many forms all around us and trust in it. It calls us to understand the grandeur we all experience

and it also gives us the will to know our part in the play. It's a good thing. And an open door.”

Just then the elevator lights flickered some more and then came back on full and the little box started in its last descent. The occupants gave a sigh of relief and laughed. The world had not come to an end and everyone's religious tradition was still in tact. But there was a greater sense of good will and movement as the door opened.

The conversation went to lunch as they all decided that wanted to continue the conversation. They decided on a pepperoni pizza with a big salad and bowl of garlic bread for the Buddhist. The world had taken another turn for the better.

Do you believe in Evolution?

I do.

And still, even if you don't happen to believe in evolution you are welcome here, because everything and every person in this elevator of life affects us, and in turn is affected and part of how

we evolve and come to know our place in an ever Evolving  
universe!

So be it.