

”Is You Got Good Religion?”

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## Opening Words

These words are from Martin Luther King, Jr.

*This is where we are.*

*Where do we go from here?*

*First we must massively assert our dignity and worth.*

*We must stand up amidst a system that still oppresses,  
and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values . . .*

*What is needed is a realization that power without love  
Is reckless and abusive,*

*And that love without power is sentimental and anemic.*

*Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice,  
and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands  
against love.*

*And this is what we must see as we move on.*

## THE READING

from “Is You Got Good Religion”

by Dr. Charles G. Adams

*Our reading is taken from a sermon delivered by Dr. Charles G. Adams at the worship service commemorating the anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, which was held during the founding conference of the **Progressive Religious Partnership** in Washington, DC in April, 2001.*

. . . . Why have a religion that has not been challenged and critiqued? Why have a counterfeit religion when you can have the real thing? Why have something that’s worthless when you can have something that’s powerful? Why have something cold when you can have something hot? Why have a religion that is unquestioned when you can have a religion that has been cleansed and corrected, beautified, clarified, fortified, magnified, purified, rectified, sanctified, qualified authentic religion.

There’s an old black spiritual that asks the question, "Is you got good religion?" Not just "Is you got religion?," but "Is it any good?" There’s a whole lot of dangerous, bad, sick religion in the world.

Bad religion can make you hard, cold, mean, and insensitive.

Bad religion is worse than no religion. There’s not an evil cause in the world that has not been sponsored by somebody’s sick perverted, bad, hateful religion.

Bad religion spawned the military crusades.

Bad religion grabbed the enforcement powers of the state to enforce "freedom of conscience."

Bad religion set up the Inquisitions to enforce religious conformity.

Bad religion murdered the Anabaptists, burned Joan of Arc at the stake, executed Jan Hus and Hans Dink.

Bad religion killed William Tyndale for translating the Bible into the language of the people.

Bad religion took apartheid to South Africa, brought slavery to America, fostered segregation, bigotry and exploitation, organized the Ku Klux Klan, generated the Nazi party, created the Moral Majority, produced Jim Jones, Jimmy Baker, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, and David Koresh.

Bad Religion assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, murdered Anwar Sadat, slew Indira Gandhi, carved up Lebanon, destroyed Iran , devastated Iraq, oppressed the poor, crucified Jesus, killed Martin Luther King Jr, bludgeoned Rodney King, . . . devastated Yugoslavia.

That's why Grandma wanted to know, "Is you got **good** religion?"

Bad religion takes life; good religion gives life.

Bad religion destroys folk; good religion liberates folk.

Bad religion talks about national defense, but good religion talks about national purpose.

Bad religion lobbies for support for religion from the government, but good religion clings to its freedom by rejecting dependency upon the government or excessive entanglement with the government.

Bad religion divides folks; good religion unifies folks.

Bad religion makes you hate folks; good religion makes you love everybody.

Bad religion segregates, good religion integrates.

Bad religion stays in the church, good religion breaks loose in the world.

Bad religion hangs around the altar, good religion walks down the Jericho road.

Bad religion accentuates the love of power but good religion lifts up the power of love.

**IS YOU GOT GOOD RELIGION?**

## THE SERMON

[judging others]

It was almost two decades ago when I was invited to participate in the founding conference of the Progressive Religious Partnership in Washington, D.C. For reasons I do not know, the organization didn't go far beyond its founding. When I returned to Rockford, the sermon report I delivered was one of the most enthusiastically received sermons of that year. In the Rockford congregation, like most UU congregations, of course, there is nothing on which we are unanimous, and that sermon was no exception, nor did I expect it to be. One member, who grew up in May Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church in Syracuse, was particularly critical of my sermon and shared his displeasure with me and others.

One of the things to which he took exception was my brief summary of the stirring sermon delivered by Dr. Adams at the gathering 's Wednesday night worship service commemorating the death of Dr. King. Said the critic, "*setting yourself up as the arbiter of who has "good or bad religion is not my idea of progressive religion. I am trying to remember who said, 'Judge not that ye be not judged'". Some of you may share his question.*

As I recall, "Judge not . . ." was said by the same teacher who, according to scripture, moments later in the same sermon on the same mount said:

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, not can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

(Actually, what we call "the Sermon on the Mount" is just a compilation of that teacher's best lines. This is just one case where they do not really fit together.)

Obviously, Dr. Adams suggestion that there is "bad" religion and our responsibility for judging it is not new. "Beware," Jesus of Nazareth said, "of false prophets."

[discriminating]

That critical member was operating on the same misunderstanding which some others carry. It is true that Unitarian Universalists affirm the importance of religious diversity. We celebrate the reality that there are many paths to life's important truths. Dr. Thomas Kerr, one of the significant ministers in the history of the Rockford Congregation, in his final sermon as he ended his prior ministry to the First Baptist Church in Rockford, before aligning with the Unitarian Universalists, declared that he had discovered that the things that Roman Catholics, Jews, Greek Orthodox, Muslims and various kinds of Protestants had in common were far more important than the petty things which divided them. We are as convinced in 2020 as Dr. Kerr was in 1870, that he spoke the truth. The title of that sermon was "*Developing Discrimination,*" by which Dr. Kerr meant *discernment*: the ability to separate the true from the false, the wheat from the chaff, good religion from bad religion.

There is not a lot I can add to what Dr. Adams said in his sermon, but I do believe it is important to expand on it for the very reason that my critic from Syracuse is probably not alone in believing that it is somehow illiberal to acknowledge that there is bad religion out there.

[get rid of religion?]

Episcopal Bishop Jack Spong once made reference to a secular Jewish friend who, in the light of the terrorism of 9/11, suggested that the time had come when we should bulldoze all the churches and mosques and synagogues and temples, because religion is a scourge on the earth. What the friend was talking about, of course, is bad religion, of which there is no lack of evidence.

We use the term "fanatic" to describe *"a person filled with excessive zeal, especially for an extreme political or religious cause."* Fanaticism is not new. There have always been people whose need for security and structure was so extreme, that they were willing to buy into religious teachings that made their fragile mental health even more precarious. They appear under every banner: there have been Jewish fanatics, Muslim fanatics, Christian fanatics, Hindu fanatics, and humanist fanatics. But they are always the minority. There has always been a far greater number of people who pay lip service to religion, but on whom it has little or no observable impact. And then there are the people whose lives are enriched by their religious involvement, and some of these can be found in virtually every religion. It would be wrong to reject all religion solely on the basis of the fanatics, reasonable though it might seem to do so.

[black & white]

Let's look more closely at the criteria which we might utilize to differentiate "bad" religion from "good" religion, false prophets from the true, or, as I would prefer to put it, "worse" religion from "better" religion.

That preference I just expressed ["worse" instead of bad and "better" instead of good] is a piece of the differentiation. Worse religion has a predisposition toward viewing the world through lenses that render everything in sharp distinctions of good and evil, saint and sinner, holy and profane. Somehow, it is easier for us to make gross distinctions rather than to expend energy and time in recognizing that the real world has a lot more grays than it does blacks or whites. Almost every good contains elements of evil, and many evils have some hints of good about them.

[focusing on past or future vs. now]

Worse religion is usually focused clearly on the rear view mirror. To them, "truth" was given in the past. Life was better in the past. Everything was simpler in the past. "All we need to do is to go back to the 10 Commandments and everything would be better." What they mean, of course, go back to the 10 Commandments as they have chosen to interpret them -- not the commandments as they were originally understood. "We believe every word in the Bible," means "We believe every word in the Bible we choose to believe, in the way we choose to interpret them." And often, the past of which they dream never existed as they believe it did.

Or, some worse-religion focuses far in the future -- on a coming world, or an afterlife, rather than on this life here, today, on planet earth. One way religion has tried to help people adapt to the challenges of life is to encourage believers to set those challenges aside- it will be better later, so put up with it now. An old song my father taught me averred that during the Depression, "Salvation Army lasses come out every night, to tell us what's wrong and what's right," and the chorus went:

*You will eat, bye and bye,  
In that glorious land above the sky;*

*Work and pray, live on hay  
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.*

[I found on the internet that the song was written around 1910 in "The Preacher and the Slave," a composition by legendary labor hero Joe Hill. The song became part of the widely distributed "Little Red Songbooks" of the Industrial Workers of the World (the I.W.W., or Wobblies).]

[status quo]

There has been a tendency for worse-religion to support the status quo, in spite of the teachings of the ancient prophets that the measure of one's goodness was how they created justice. It was this status quo supporting dimension of religion that led Karl Marx to refer to religion as: *"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."* Marx viewed religion as harmful, because it served to prevent people from seeing the class structure and oppression around them, thus serving as an obstacle to change.

Slave holders wanted their slaves to get religion to the degree that it taught the passive acceptance of their station in life. The problem was that while the Bible lessons included the apostle Paul's teaching that slaves should obey their masters, Moses was also there between the same covers telling Pharaoh, "Let My People Go." Better-religion focuses mostly on the present world and the quality of life here and now [with due attention to how it will impact the future in this world]. This requires attention to justice.

Worse-religion teaches that all of the truth has been revealed by a teacher in the past and that it is a trap for us to be open to learning new things about the world because they might conflict with the ancient perspective. The conflict between science and religion is actually a conflict between 1<sup>st</sup> century science and 21<sup>st</sup> century science.

Bishop Spong, whom I was privileged to interview as a guest on my TV program in Rockford, reminded us that part of the view of women was based on the ancient understanding that the semen from the male actually contained a tiny human being and that the female was only a vessel in which it was planted to grow. A female was just an imperfect male. The discovery of the nature of reproduction was the beginning of the change in the status of women -- or it was for those who were willing to understand it. The Pope continues to cling to the belief in female inferiority. That is not good religion.

[dependence vs. interdependence]

Worse-religion emphasizes dependency. Once upon a time we used to stress that better religion taught independence – people were to stand on their own two feet to face the world. Being open to new ideas, we have come to realize that independence can be as much of a trap as dependence and that real living is about interdependence. We Unitarian Universalists now proclaim the "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The old religious paradigm was about domination, going forth to subdue the earth. The new paradigm emphasizes harmony, partnership, co-operation.

[love vs. hate]

As Dr. Adams pointed out in his sermon, worse religion, while cloaking itself in words of love, actually teaches hate. Those who believe differently are seen as a threat to the believers in worse religion. Those who worship differently, those who love differently, those who dress differently, those who wear their hair differently are seen as a threat to collective purity. The "others" become defined as "the enemy." It is true that group solidarity is readily constructed on

having common enemies. Worse religion builds itself up by finding others to tear down. Pat Robertson's money comes from using his bully television pulpit to point to satanic influences everywhere.

[are we any less hateful?]

The scary question that emerges is, "How is what Dr. Adams did in Washington or what I am doing now different from what leaders on the religious right do?" Am I not using the same technique of finding someone to attack? I believe it is different – but of course I would. You'll have to decide for yourself, but here is how I see the difference.

When Bishop Spong visited Rockford for a public speech at the Rockford Women's Club, as well as his appearance on my TV show, there was an intense (I was going to say rabid, but let's be less judgmental and say "intense") group of pickets outside the theatre, trying to dissuade people from going in to hear the Bishop's liberal ideas. [I felt I had a glimpse of what the group we are told urged the crucifixion of Jesus must have been like.] Bishop Spong came to town to preach a gospel of love, but because he challenged some of the traditional beliefs those people cherished, they were highly agitated.

And then one of the crowd members spotted me, and yelled out, "There goes Weissbard -- of course!," and others joined in. As I was going into the theater, someone in the crowd shouted, "He's a Unitarian. He thinks everyone can get into heaven -- except Fundamentalist Christians like us." Deciding this was no time for theological niceties, I turned and called back, "You're wrong. I believe there's room there for you too." [The issue in my mind was not whether I believed in an afterlife: the question was whether, if a heaven existed, would some people be excluded because of their beliefs.]

[valuing diversity does not mean accepting everything]

Believing in diversity does not mean believing that it does not matter what others believe. It does not mean that everyone is equally right. It does not mean that all forms of religion are equally life-affirming. It does not mean that we dare not affirm the truth as we see it. It does not mean that someone who is firmly convinced that  $2 + 2 = 5$  has a right to have that taught in the public schools. It does not mean that we should sit back passively while women are belittled or LBGTQA folks are attacked or, Muslims are all depicted as fanatics, or our right to vote is abrogated.

My late colleague, Forrester Church, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, was the most published and most interviewed Unitarian Universalist minister of our generation. He had a phrase he included in most of the sermons of his I've heard or read. Forrest defined religion as "our human response to being alive and having to die."

That's fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough for me. That response can be either positive or negative. To me, the best religion is the kind that encourages people to widen their circle of inclusion so that it encompasses not only themselves, and their family, and the people like them, but also the whole human family, and even the entire interdependent web of all existence.

[inclusion]

One of the quotations I have often cited is the one I once heard attributed to Calvin Coolidge who allegedly said, in speaking of religion: "*When I say religion, I mean, of course, the Christian religion; and I when I say the Christian religion I mean, of course, the Protestant*

*religion, and when I say the Protestant religion, I mean the Protestant Episcopal religion.”*  
[Having searched for verification of the quotation on the internet, I must confess I can find none, so it may be totally apocryphal, but the message fits many people’s limited views of religion.]

In contrast, when I say "religion," I mean not only the Unitarian Universalist, nor the liberal, nor the Protestant, nor the Christian variety, but “better religion” in its diverse manifestations. We have learned that wisdom about how to live better lives is not the exclusive of any one tradition. There is better religion and worse religion in every tradition.

Every tradition can be used and abused. I’ve known some Unitarian Universalists who were as rigid as the most rigid Christian Fundamentalist. Also, we must acknowledge that there are Christian Fundamentalists who can be every bit as loving and accepting of diversity as the most loving Unitarian Universalist.

Bishop Spong, while defining himself as a Trinitarian, suggested a three part creed. He urged us to, "live fully, love wastefully, and to be all that we are capable of being." Part of that living fully involved committing ourselves to doing all that we can to be sure others have that same opportunity. There was nothing in his message which did not speak to me. You see, it is by his fruits that I judge him, and they are good fruits. I have known many followers of the prophet Jesus who have inspired me to seek to live a better life. And the same is true of some followers of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and followers of the Prophet Muhammed; and followers of Gautama the Buddha, and Lao Tse, among others. These are often people who live exemplary lives. I may not fully share the path they take to get to their truth, but the truth itself radiates from their lives as much as from their words.

Bishop Spong would not be satisfied being a Unitarian Universalist because he has a sense of a particular relationship in his life with Jesus, even though he rejects most of the **myths** surrounding Jesus. In his final lecture at Chautauqua two years ago, Bishop Spong pointed out that although he has been a Christian his entire life, he does not believe it makes him superior to anyone. It is simply a fact of his upbringing, along with a personal desire to continue being a disciple of Jesus. His understanding of Jesus illuminates his path through life, and I respect that deeply.

My path is a different one. Having been raised as a Unitarian Universalist, in this congregation, I am not inclined to experience Jesus as a unique figure in the same way Bishop Spong does, nor does he ask me to. I view religion with a wider angle lens which works better for me. I try to live in such a way as to keep in mind what is best about religion as I have come to experience and understand it, and I endeavor to remain open to new insights.

[Frederick Douglass]

With the current dramatic increase in awareness of the impact of systemic racism, this year many preachers of “good religion” looked back to Frederick Douglass’ 1852 address on “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? In fact, Douglass effectively addressed the “Good Religion” theme during his address when he asserted:

*The fact that the church of our country, (with fractional exceptions), does not esteem “the Fugitive Slave Law” as a declaration of war against religious liberty, implies that that church regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will towards man. It esteems sacrifice above mercy; psalm-singing above right-doing; solemn meetings above practical righteousness. A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the*

*naked, and who enjoin obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy, is a curse, not a blessing to mankind. For my part, I would say, welcome infidelity! welcome atheism! welcome anything! in preference to the gospel, as preached by those Divines! They convert the very name of religion into an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty. . . .*  
[He went on to say]

*In speaking of the American church, however, let it be distinctly understood that I mean the great mass of the religious organizations of our land. There are exceptions, and I thank God that there are. Noble men may be found, scattered all over these Northern States, of whom Henry Ward Beecher of Brooklyn, Samuel J. May of Syracuse, and my esteemed friend, Rev. R. R. Raymond, are shining examples.*

[Samuel May was a Unitarian Minister and the Syracuse congregation he served is named May Memorial Unitarian Church.]

I commend Douglass' entire address to you which is almost as timely now as it was in 1852, in spite of a civil war and a civil rights movement. It is as important for good religion to address the issues of racism today as when he spoke in 1852. [There are some very moving presentations of Douglass' address on the internet.]

[the bottom line]

I believe each of us is responsible for looking at our beliefs and our religious practices and asking ourselves, "Do we have good religion?" "Does my religion encourage me to live a more fruitful, responsible life?" And if we believe the answer is yes, we need to ask ourselves, "Are the fruits of our religion so visible in the ways in which we live that others, looking at us, would agree that we 'got good religion'?"

There is an ancient Chinese curse which says, "May you live in interesting times." Friends, these are, like it or not, interesting times. It is my believe that one of the things that can help to sustain us in these "interesting times is "Good Religion."

**Tell me, "Is you got good religion?"**

### **Introduction to the Offertory**

The Unitarian Universalist Association, with which this congregation is affiliated declares the seven principles which we covenant to affirm and promote, and it lists five sources of the living tradition which we share. In 2006, our most prolific contemporary composer, Jason Shelton, undertook the composition of a cantata celebrating those five sources. Co-incidentally, that was the year in which I completed 41 years of full time ministry in our association, the final 27 of which were as senior minister of our congregation in Rockford, IL. The choir of that congregation arranged to honor my ministry by commissioning Jason to compose the movement of that cantata, addressing Unitarian Universalism's Humanist roots, in my honor. They did not realize that the lyricist for the cantata was The Rev. Kendyl Gibbons, who had been the first ministerial intern I mentored and one of the most brilliant of our ministers serving today. Her interpretation of the meaning of the Humanist source which is stated in the Association's bylaws as "*Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*" is right on? I was totally blown away by the total surprise and to honor. I cried. Here is a recording of the first performance of that movement, "No Other World," performed by the choir of the UU Church of Nashville, TN.



## **BENEDICTION**

The time is now, the place is here,  
The good we know, the earth we share,  
This day we have, this love we give.  
No other truth, no other joy,  
No other life, no other world..

And now, may the truths that make us free,  
the hope that never dies,  
and the love that casts out fear,  
lead us, and those we love, and those whom nobody loves,  
forward together 'til the dayspring breaks and the shadows flee away. Amen.