

“Unapologetically Religious”

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First Church in Boston

June 1, 2025

I am—and have always been—a *religious* person. Are you? Is “religious” part of how you think of yourself? I suspect some of you are nodding yes . . . while another portion of you may be raising your eyebrows with a “no, not really.” And yet, here we all are together in a church—or on the First Church YouTube, because, well, that’s how we *also* do church in 2025.

Church is quite literally our name—“First Church in Boston”—named so because we were the first *church* in Boston. Although we should note that the First Parish of Dorchester is the oldest congregation within the *present-day* city limits of Boston by a few weeks. But when both congregations were founded in 1630, Boston and Dorchester were separate towns. And while we’re on the subject of “oldest,” I’ll give a shout-out to the oldest church *building* in the city, Old North, built in 1723. Asking who is “oldest” may feel like a simple curiosity for historians, but I think it’s also a way to explore the question: what does it mean to be religious?

Are you religious because you “go to church” . . . physically showing up for a particular kind of event in a certain kind of building? Does “church” mean the building? Or can you be a church without a building?

Of course, when our church began, there was no building. There was a group of Puritan Christians who gathered under a tree on July 30, 1630, to create and sign a covenant—a declaration of their faith and their promises to each other and to the God of their understanding. Throughout this year, we have been revisiting this covenant. Dusting off the dated language, we have sought to explore the underlying questions that the text answers. Questions like what could it mean to be *rooted*, *faithful*, or *embodied*? Questions such as what could it mean to be in *community*, to *put our faith into action*, and to *live with intention*? We also asked what it could mean to *seek wholeness in a broken world*, to show *mutual love and respect*, and to *ask for help*? These nine questions suggested alternative ways to read the historic covenant as religious questions that we may still be asking today.

What are *your* religious questions?

In trying to understand what it means to be religious, the book *The Disenchantment of the World* by French philosopher Marcel Gauchet has been formative for me. In short, Gauchet

suggests that religion evolved as a set of answers to the question “what’s out there in the dark?” While Gauchet imagines this question relative to our prehistoric ancestors discerning mysteries and threats beyond the circle of firelight, today we continue to encounter the edges of our understanding all the time. Uncertainties continue to confront us even amidst oceans of knowledge.

I read Gauchet in a class on *secularization* during seminary. At the time, religion seemed to be on a steep, unstoppable decline in modern societies. From empty cathedrals in Europe to increasing numbers of those who identified as “spiritual but not religious” here in the United States, it seemed as if religious life could simply fade away. Today, I think we are in a different place. Religious frameworks remain strongly influential in shaping the current political landscape—including the power of white Christian nationalism in our country. The question I find most compelling today is not whether “religion” will survive, but rather *which* religious vision or visions will shape how we connect to one another. What *could* it mean to be religious remains a very live question.

To be honest, all year I have wrestled with whether to frame our questions as what *could* religion mean versus what *does* religion mean. I want answers. I want to definitively know what it *does* mean to be religious. And if I were to give you *an* answer, I would say being religious is intentionally acknowledging that we are all part of a larger story of purpose and meaning. How we tell that story varies—we may tell stories of Jesus or Ganesh, the Buddha or Moses’ sister, Miriam. We may describe the larger power to which we relate as Allah, God, or the interconnected web of Life (capital L). And we may find purpose and meaning through rituals of worship, service to others, faithfully following moral instructions, and more. Religion is not *one* simple thing. Being religious is the meaning-making aspect of who we are as human beings. In this sense, I believe we are all religious, we are all seeking to make sense of what it means to live meaningfully and well—even if we never step foot inside a church building.

And here we are inside a church building.

To me the building is not “the church.” And yet the church building *is* not insignificant. As a distinct space, this building and this Sanctuary enable us to gather as a group in a place that grounds us in its constancy and inspires us in its beauty. Assembling together as a group is critical to what it means to be a church. In the Christian Bible, the Greek word that is typically translated church is *ekklēsia* means “assembly.” While personal spiritual practices and experiences can be a vital part of being religious and finding meaning, coming together with others in shared experiences of making sense of the world is, for me, foundational to what it means to be religious.

Without the communal aspect of spiritual seeking, I fear something vital is lost. Maybe it's because the very act of connecting with others is just so very important. Indeed, the longest running study on Adult Development has found that the top predictor of happiness [is "good relationships."](#) We are pack animals that need to be in relationship with others. And, we are *thinking, conscious, curious, wondering, fearful, loving* pack animals who need to make some sense of what we are all doing here together. Add "seeking meaning" to "intentional assembly" and you have religious community.

So, if religious community is such a good thing, why can we be so hesitant to identify as religious?

I imagine that some of the hesitation arises from association of religion with dogma and evangelism. In other words, people telling you *the* right way to think and act and condemning you if you do not. But this approach to religion is *not* who we and other religious liberals are today, nor is it who we have been for some time. This is true not only for Unitarian Universalists like us, but also for liberals in other faith traditions as well. A *liberal* religious perspective makes space for diversity of thought, variation of practice, and difference in action. As Unitarian Universalists, we say that "love is the center" of our faith as we seek to include multiple religious traditions and cultural expressions of faith within our communities.

The common ground across liberal religions is an ongoing search for finding meaning and purpose in a changing world. When the world changes, the answers for how to live meaningfully and well may shift too. What once seemed unthinkable—gender equity or even gender transition—may now be valued as an ever-expanding expression of Love. Or, what once seemed acceptable—God-given racial hierarchies and enslavement of people—may now be rebuked as hateful attitudes and actions. Such changing religious perspectives does not signal weakness of conviction; rather adapting to the moment in which we live demonstrates a courage to engage. Being in relationship to the people and places in which we dwell enables religion to be relevant to the moment. Such a religion is a good thing.

I wonder then, what would it look like to be unapologetically religious—as religious liberals, as Unitarian Universalists? Recently a member of the congregation asked me a similar question, specifically pointing to jewelry, asking, "why don't more of us wear UU symbols on our necklaces?!" It's a compelling question. What would you wear or do that would identify you publicly as Unitarian Universalist? What might you wear or do to publicly display your unapologetic sense of being religious?

For me, being *unapologetically* religious means being confident in the values and beliefs that ground and guide me. It means having faith in the importance of asking big questions about what matters as well as asking specific questions about what matters most in *this* place, *this* moment, with *this* person or group of persons?

Being religious is the meaning-making aspect of who we are as human beings. And I'm not okay with surrendering this most precious part of being human to those who offer answers I find hateful or unjust. To those who are skeptical about "religion," I want it to be clear that there *are* other religious visions for how to live meaningfully and well. And we can explore those visions *together* here in our *liberal Unitarian Universalist* assembly.

We are in a time and place when a vision of "America First" promotes actions of inequality, indifference, and even cruelty that impact too many lives. Threatened with deportation and defunding, retaliation and restrictions, fear grips individuals and institutions. Now is a time when we must choose whether or not we will be unapologetic religious liberals that publicly claim a vision of justice, equity, generosity, and love. Now is a time when we need to talk with one another about what it means to us to live meaningfully and well—and how we might put those values and vision into action as individuals and as a church.

This building as well as the technologies of video, email, and phones enable us to connect with other people who are seeking a similar vision as our own. These connections and these religious questions are what we have been about as a church community since 1630. I am so proud to be part of this community today in 2025 as we continue to explore how to live meaningfully and well. I hope you are as well. May we together respond to the changing questions and needs of the people and places we relate to here and now. Such an unapologetically liberal religious resistance is, I believe, critical to this moment.

May it be so. Amen.