

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
August 18, 2013  
Part 1: Redefining Community: Rising or Retracting?

## THE FUTURE OF RELIGION: OPPORTUNITY OR OBSTACLE?

It's always a bit daunting to sit down and open that new blank document window on the computer literally shining brightly in full view with not a single word on the page as you begin to compose a sermon. Nevertheless, the time to write, to stroke the keys and put words on the blank screen comes sometimes gently, and more often urgently.

When I did at least put down on paper in written word the overarching theme and particulars of my sermon series for this summer over two months ago, a pattern emerged. Some alliteration yes, as in today's title: *Redefining Community: Rising or Retracting?* - A pattern that continues in weeks 2 and 3 if you care to look ahead. Perhaps more importantly, I've framed the whole series in questions you might notice, not declarative statements. But one of my favorite things about doing a sermon series each summer is that I consider it a conversation of sorts, and while I may be doing all of the talking at the moment, I consider it an ongoing dialogue with you, with the blank pages on my computer screen, with the wider community that social and technical media engages and with myself. Today, my task is to create some context for the journey we will be on these three Sundays.

*The Future of Religion: Opportunity or Obstacle?* That is the question at the heart of this sermon series and I will admit that I remain as baffled and bewildered as perhaps you might be with such an undertaking. Honestly, who can really say what the future of religion, the future of anything really, is? This is a perplexing, complicated topic. If you came expecting answers, clarity, declarations or simple formulas, you might be disappointed. Just a fair warning. We all may end up with even more questions at the conclusion of this series than the ones we are starting with today.

Regardless, what brought me to this reflection and conversation about the future of religion has unfolded over the course of the past year in particular. Whenever I have the chance to be in a classroom and teach an occasional course or two here on campus - which I do each academic year - I remind our students that data does indeed matter. It does not need to have the last word, but we must pay attention, heed, and learn from it.

To be sure, some of the data I've come across is confusing. For example, in a recent Gallup study documented in the book *God is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*, Editor in Chief Frank Newport makes the case that religion is as alive and powerful as its ever been. In fact, the Gallup research projects that religion may be more significant in the years to come. It is also noted in this study that we may be on the cusp of a religious renaissance. Could this be a distinct opportunity?

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To the contrary, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's recent study notes that the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a steady pace. One fifth of the U.S. public and nearly one third of adults under the age of 30 are religiously unaffiliated. This number reflects the highest percentage to date in Pew Research Center polling.

So what to make of all of these current findings? How do religious professionals like me preach or engage with a changing demographic and confusing data? Research, writers, scholars and commentaries I've consulted over these months have all suggested that religion as we have known it in previous generations is dying, but this death does not represent a sharp rise in "New Atheists" necessarily. The Pew Research shows that those who describe themselves as atheist or agnostic have grown less than five percent over the last five years. There is, some argue, no return to the secular city. On the other hand, some have noted that the number of "nones" or those who are religiously unaffiliated has risen nearly twenty percent. And although the Gallup Poll projects a distinct rise in religious interest, it also suggests that increasingly, Americans don't have a religious identity, or they identify with broad religious labels rather than specific denominations. Based on this data, we can surmise that observing the rise of the "nones" or the religiously non-affiliated we are at the same time seeing a continued, if not renewed interest in religion. To the question, as one scholar put it, is religion dead or alive? – we would answer yes.

Furthermore, there is some irony that, as you note at the very top of your order of service, this is the 13th Sunday after Pentecost. In the Christian liturgical (calendar) year, this is known as the Pentecost season, the longest season in fact, in which the essential mandate is to speak about the spirit. Religious scholar and professor Walter Bruggemann understands that the interfaces of speak and spirit is immediately problematic. "The spirit," he notes, "is elusive, free-reaching, refusing all of our resistant categories. It turns out that our speech puts words into sentences and our sentences into testimony that inescapably suggests clarity and some room for confidence in the reliability of our formulation. And then, just when we have found the right formulation, the spirit surges again and shatters our formulation." And I would suggest that sometimes our religious texts, for better or for worse, could strengthen or inhibit clarity and confidence, even shatter our formulations. The texts we've heard for today are an example of the latter unfortunately, as some have described Luke's gospel as "embarrassing words of Jesus." The truth is that often scriptures tell us something that names realities in hard terms. It has taken me a long time to appreciate these disturbing passages, to understand that a description is not a prescription. Scriptural does not always mean right. We have a sense of what it may have meant for Jesus to say that his presence would bring a sword of division that would force his followers to make difficult decisions that put them at odds with the structures around them – government, religions, even family. One writer illuminated for me that behind these words is the

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emerging vision of martyrdom in early Christian communities. We have no reason to think that Jesus is blessing this reality, only naming it. 2000 years later, we know all too well the sadder ironies behind these words. Followers of Christ have brought more swords into the world – whether through medieval crusades or contemporary justifications of violence against the other or those on the wrong side. Nevertheless, each and every day the news reminds us that clarity and confidence are not always the operative word and indeed stability and clarity hang in the balances of our lives. When the familiar has become ineffective and the ordinary seems ruptured beyond repair, it is still the strange God of blessings that can restore. The future of religion and how we come to understand it holds all of these things and more in creative tension.

To be sure, the irony of this Pentecost/Spirit season should not be lost on us in an era of post-modernity where many people are more open to various forms of spirituality. Forms that do not resemble in any way organized religion. The Pew research found that 46 million unaffiliated adults in the U.S are in some way religious or spiritual. Two-thirds of them, 68%, indicated belief in God. More than one third of the “nones” classify themselves as spiritual but not religious. Highly regarded and thoughtful researcher and observer of religious trends, Diana Butler Bass, calls the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Great Religious Recession. Her research points to the emergence of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves and expressing faith are being reborn. That is, moving from religion being about God to being an experience of God. These projections align closely with those of religious scholar Harvey Cox, who makes the observation in his book, *The Future of Faith*, that we are indeed undergoing a transformation regarding human experience of the divine. He notes that we are moving from an era that he characterizes as the Age of Belief, with an emphasis on creeds and doctrine, to an Age of the Spirit characterized as non-dogmatic, non-institutional, and non-hierarchical.

So where does that leave us, or even take us in the future? It's worth noting here that Dr. Robert Bellah, a great sociologist of religion, longtime professor across the Bay at the Univ. of CA Berkeley, died very suddenly this summer. I think it is quite fair to say that the impact of his scholarship has been unequivocally formative in the fields of comparative religion and the sociology of religion. He will be greatly missed. I mention this because one of his widely read studies, *Habits of the Heart*, profoundly impacted many others and me. Published in 1985, it is based on interviews and reports of a team of sociologists who, along with Bellah, were attempting to assess the moral character of American society. What they discovered was a profound tension between individualism and commitment to community.

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“The religious expressions of this tension were evident,” writes Mark Juergensmeyer, in a recent essay noting how Bellah has changed the study of religion. On the one hand, religion catered to American individualism and indulgent self-expression, but also provided havens of communal commitment on the other. This seminal work of Bellah and his colleagues prompted religious studies scholars, according to Juergensmeyer, to take seriously the social dimensions of religious belief even when they seem so personal and devoid of social significance.

And this is where I find myself wondering about our understanding of community, of the collective. Will it rise up in a new way, given the trends the data is projecting, or retract out of fear of change?

The Pew Forum's study on religion noted, for example, that the religiously unaffiliated attach much less importance to belonging to a community of people with shared values and beliefs. Perhaps what it indicates is that we cannot assume community as usual will be attractive to this growing phenomenon of “nones.” Religious communities have become synonymous with groups that possess shared values and beliefs but many of the non-affiliated are choosing not to gather around these centers of shared value and power. Working on a university campus, I pay particular attention to a large component of these “nones,” those under the age of 30, for example. Some of the things that appear to be driving this population away from religion as it is currently understood have been expressed as frustration between choosing between intellectual integrity and faith, science and religion, compassion and holiness. Rachel Held Evans, in a blog that went viral on CNN said this: “There is a longing for communities in which they are safe asking tough questions and wrestling with doubt. Many would describe themselves as having highly sensitive BS meters and not easily impressed with consumerism and performance. They want substance not style, an end to the culture wars and a place where their LGBT friends feel truly welcomed. They want places that do not have a single allegiance to a political party or a single nation. They want to be challenged to live lives of holiness not just when it has to do with sex, but when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers.” And I would add that they seek interfaith understanding and dialogue. My experience is that this runs across multiple identities of religious traditions: Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, and Buddhist, not only the unaffiliated. In the end, all of us, under 30 over 30 and everywhere in between have a deep desire to be part of vibrant, meaningful and authentic community. How we define community now may in fact be evolving to a larger and previously uncharted extent.

“Community has been defined almost exclusively in terms of proximity,” writes Reza Aslan, the author of most recently *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of*

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*Nazareth.* Aslan is a Muslim scholar whom I had the pleasure to meet on campus last year, and more recently became the target of a controversial interview on Fox News. He suggests that the Internet and mass communication technologies have completely upended how communities are created and defined. “For example,” he writes, “a young Muslim heavy metal fan in Indonesia may have more in common with a young Christian heavy metal fan in London than he does with most of the people who attend his mosque or go to his school.”

Aslan also pointed out that here in the US, the Episcopal Church, with which I am a part, has split over the issue of gay marriage, with a portion of its American congregations voluntarily placing themselves under authority of bishops in Africa and Latin America who share neither their language nor their culture, or their customs and mores. These examples demonstrate that no longer do individuals or groups feel bound by geography when determining religious identities or defining community for themselves. What is true of the cyber world – which is becoming increasingly fractured and personalized – is also becoming true of religion. “Without territories and borders to constrain the meaning and composition of community, religions have become more and more personalized, fractured,” contends Aslan, “into micro communities, bound together by values that cannot be contained within any geographic boundaries.”

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Perhaps the more important question is while we see interesting data bearing itself out in America and across the globe - that is people becoming more religious – what do mean by religion? For that itself is obviously changing, and like society in general, is in a constant state of evolution, continually adapting to the social, political and technological changes taking place in the world. In much of the world, religions have become increasingly powerful and empowered. The marriage of religion and politics in a postcolonial context has unleashed both wonderful and deadly forces. “That’s when reformations occur,” writes Rabbi Brad Hirschfield.

The current grim uprising in Egypt as the devastating result of extreme polarization between Islamists and secularists is all too sobering and far more disturbing.

Reformations are about how all people deal with newly forming questions and realities, some more harsh than others. Not only is it *The Future of Religion; Opportunity or Obstacle?* - perhaps more importantly - how will the newly religiously empowered use the religions they adhere to?

Will we reach back and blindly apply past models to a vastly different world? Will those who implore secularization rule the day? Or, as Rabbi Hirschfield and others ask, will we see new and creative uses of ancient traditions that celebrate the ability to demonstrate, define and practice religion in new ways, respecting and

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demonstrating in a globalized world the increased demands of awareness to those who are different from us? What part will I play? What part will you play?

I did give you a fair warning when I began. There will always be more questions.