

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
September 1, 2013
Reclaiming Identity: Reformation or Restriction?

The Future of Religion: Opportunity or Obstacle?

*I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.*
~Stanley Kunitz, *The Layers*

I remember it as though it were yesterday. My religious identity was partly shaped, little did I know, in a basement in Western NY as a young girl growing up Catholic. It was there my brothers and I re-created the “Mass,” though I was never allowed to be the priest. It was so cold in Buffalo in the winter; we had to find ways to entertain ourselves. My educational career in Catholic schools ended in the 6th grade because of a move to the southwest deserts of Arizona. It was there at the precocious age of 13 that I boldly declared to my mother that I was no longer gaining anything from attending Mass. So I quit the Catholic Church. Surprisingly, my parents did not stand in the way, though they kept an attentive eye as I entered high school and through the influence of peers and mentors, plunged into the world of evangelical Christianity, a world I inhabited for 17 years through my undergraduate college years and beyond. A change in geographic location and beginning graduate school (for the first time) in Seattle was a leveling off point while I occasionally went to church with the Presbyterians and the Methodists. I even tried one of those ginormous evangelical Christian mega churches but the shoe clearly no longer fit. Little did I know, but the reformation of my own religious identity was well underway. Meanwhile, I’d been proclaiming all through my young adulthood that I would never live in California, even though I had traveled there frequently in my collegiate competitive athletic years. It seemed like a wacky place to a girl who knew how to play by the rules and make nice with everyone.

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I have my Catholic and Evangelical influences to thank for that. After graduate school the job offer came, and with degree in hand I drove down I-5 to none other than California and the Bay Area. After 21 years, I'm still here. And yet, the most transformative, life-altering moments came only shortly after I arrived.

Precipitated by my mother's death, I came out as a gay woman, which flew in the face of all my conservative, restrictive religious instincts and communities. I walked through the door of an Episcopal church with my partner of now 21 years, studied and trained to become an Episcopal priest and have never looked back. A threshold that changed our lives forever. Needless to say, I have been a religious devotee all of my life, particularly a Christian one, though for a brief time thought of abandoning it altogether when one of my closest evangelical friends unabashedly informed me I was on my way south – and I'm not referring here to Southern CA – to burn in hell because God does not like gay people. It was a good reason at the time for me to consider becoming a Buddhist or even an atheist. Anything but a Christian.

Catholic theologian James Alison perhaps said it best: "Give people a common enemy and you will give them a common identity. Deprive them of an enemy and you will deprive them of the crutch by which they know who they are." Others have described this oppositional religion as Christian tribalism, where God's interests have been reduced to and measured by those sharing your history, tradition and beliefs, and where one needs an enemy in order for you to feel right with God.

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It did not seem right to conclude this sermon series this morning on *The Future of Religion* and today's particular focus on *Reclaiming Identity* without at least telling you a bit about the evolution of my own religious identity. And yes, I would not be fully truthful if I did not admit that I do have, as author and theologian Brian McLaren puts it, "an internal unrest about my Christian identity." He suggests that more and more of us are seeking treatment for what we might call Conflicted Religious Identity Syndrome. That whether we realize it or not, most of us who suffer from this syndrome are trying to distance ourselves from religious hostility. McLaren explains it this way: "It is not just a Christian problem. Islamic terrorists shout 'God is great' and blow up soldiers and civilians. Their confident violence sends the majority of Muslims seeking adjectives to modify their affiliation –

moderate, progressive, peace loving in order to distinguish themselves from extremist Muslims. The same could be said for Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and atheists

too. If you're simultaneously Jewish and deeply committed to human rights for Palestinians, how do you deal with this syndrome? If you're an atheist, yet you respect the valid role of religion in society, how do you self differentiate from militant atheists?" By hostility McLaren means opposition, the sense that the other

is the enemy. He writes, "Hostility makes one unwilling to be a host; the other must be turned away, kept at a distance. Hostility is an attitude of exclusion, not embrace; of repugnance, not respect; of suspicion, not extending the benefit of the doubt; of conflict, not conviviality."

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In today's gospel from Luke, the narrative reveals another Sabbath controversy of Jesus. In this parable, Jesus joins a leader of the Pharisees who are holding him under surveillance. In his response to the leader's offer of hospitality, Jesus, even though he is the object of their hostility, is unexpectedly free for table fellowship with this Pharisee who seems strangely warmed to him. Jesus demonstrates his own Sabbath freedom to sit at the table, sharing a meal. The narrative in Luke deepens the irony through Jesus teaching, where the traditional etiquette of the banquet is inverted. Daringly, Jesus reminds the host not to invite those who can repay him – or dare I say, are like him – but rather those who cannot – the poor, the lame, and the blind – or dare I say, the other. This practice of table fellowship becomes a metaphor of the reign of God, where hospitality rather than hostility is demonstrated as foundational to the exemplary ministry and identity of Jesus. Likewise, it is an invitation to us ostensibly to find and inhabit gracious space and welcome others into it, to heal national, ethnic, racial, cultural, class and religious divisions.

Our journey through this series on *The Future of Religion* has revealed some interesting and even conflicting data. That while religion appears to be on the rise

not only here but also around the world, conversely, and particularly in the United States, a most striking development on the religious scene as we have learned has been the doubling of the proportion of Americans who say they have no religion – 15 – 16% of the population over the past two decades. Mark Silk, Professor of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, writes, “We’re not talking about people who just don’t go to church or some other house of

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worship or who happen not to affiliate with one. If you ask what is your religion, they say none. The rise of the nones may have something to do with a decrease in religious belief. By far, the largest proportions of nones claim to believe in God and many engage in spiritual practices. What they do not do is identify with a religious tradition.” Why not?” asks Silk. He contends that what seems to be happening is a shift in the way we think of religious identification itself. “Where once we considered religious identity as something given to us in childhood and retained unless and until we change it, now we are more inclined to see it as a description of what we do and believe in the present. The future of religion is really about choice.”

The psalm that Peter read for us this morning is instructive at this juncture. It is an example of mature faith that rises out of sacred memory and in hard, disorienting times longs for some kind of orientation, a return to the old ways. Such a longing is not what happens. The treasured ways of old do not return. Rather, a new reality, a new normal occurs; a new creation comes forth, a creation wiser in the ways of faith, wiser in the ways of life and wiser in the ways of our identities. Theologian and Hebrew Scripture scholar Walter Bruggemann calls this spiritual move “reorientation.”

Paul Knitter is a Christian theologian and also a leading theologian in religious pluralism. He is clear and urgent about the need for interreligious dialogue and the increasingly common experience of dual religious belonging where believers follow

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more than one spiritual path. In an article entitled *My God is Bigger Than Your God! Time for Another Axial Shift in the History of Religions*, he writes: “Given the geo-

political state of our world today, given the role that religions are playing in the world and the role that they are called to play, given the looming necessity of turning the impending clash of civilizations into a dialogue of civilizations, the religious communities that populate our planet have reached a point in their history in which they must lay aside or radically reinterpret their traditional and various ways of claiming that My God is bigger than your God.” “The religions,” he says, “can no longer continue to make the kinds of claims of superiority that most of them have made in the past...the religious communities of the world can and must form a community of communities – a community in which each tradition will preserve its identity and at the same time deepen and broaden that identity through learning from, appealing to, and working with other communities.”

Yes, this is indeed spiritual and religious reorientation and what I believe has the power to transform and make our world a far more life-giving place. It forces us to ask: Is the only kind of religious identity one that is oppositional, more hostile to those who are not like-minded? Is there another option? What is the new normal? My proximity in working on campus at Stanford with students across multiple religious identities has helped me realize that it is possible to have a deep Christian identity and one that is strongly benevolent toward others of different and deeply held religious identities. As a result, my love and respect for these students has inevitably brought me to a loving and respectful encounter with their religious identity as well. It has indeed

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transformed and deepened not only my life and Christian identity, but also my vocation as a priest.

A reformation of religious identity as opposed to restriction takes courage and resilience. Lest we forget as we have celebrated the 50th anniversary of the March

on Washington this past Wednesday, *I Have a Dream* ultimately came from the voice of a preacher, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who turned from his prepared text

when Mahalia Jackson implored him to ‘tell em about the Dream Martin!’ and delivered a speech that changed the course of civil rights history, becoming one of the most timeless and recognizable refrains in the world. Rev. King did not cower from his Christian identity as the speech itself, illustrated one writer, “reverberates with biblical rhythms and parallels.” Equally so, Rev. Martin Luther King also held strong benevolence toward those with other religious identities, as the nonviolent teachings of Mahatma Gandhi were deeply formative to his education and understanding of freedom and justice for all.

In his book *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed Cross the Road*, Brian McLaren gives the final word to the voice of a Muslim, born under apartheid in South Africa. Farid Esack pioneered Islamic liberation theology, working nonviolently with Christians, Hindus and others to overcome apartheid and gender inequality and to pursue justice, peace and the common good. This is

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what Esack had to say about the rediscovery of a strong benevolent Muslim identity:

“What we do know is that our world has become small and the dangers threatening it multifarious...humankind, especially the marginalized and oppressed, need each other to confront these dangers and the challenges of liberation. Let us hope that, because of, and not despite our different creeds and worldviews, we are going to walk this road side by side. All of us participate in the shaping of cultural and religious images and assumptions that oppress or liberate the other, and thus ourselves.”

Collectively and individually, we arrive in various times and places in history and in life at crossroads, where thresholds have the power to transform and transcend anything we could ever imagine might happen in our lifetime. The future of religion does indeed present us with a choice to cross thresholds or back away, to open our hearts or clench our fists, to identify by opposition and hostility or to identify with hospitality and compassion. What choices will we make? The poet Stanley Kunitz writes “I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray. In my darkest night, when the moon was covered and I roamed through wreckage, a nimbus-clouded voice directed me: Live in the layers, not on the litter. Though I lack the art to decipher it, no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations is already written. I am not done with my changes.”

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Little did I know that crossing the threshold of that Episcopal church 21 years ago would reform, not restrict my religious identity beyond my wildest imagination to reflect and cherish the loving God I was never willing to let go nor would let go of me. I am still a Christian. Little did I know that in this year to come I would cross that threshold once again to be welcomed and embraced to flourish in my full humanity, along with my partner Kathy, and lean into the fullness of God's grace, benevolence and love. At a wedding. Ours.