

READING FOR THE FIRST SESSION

Religion is that core of ultimate meanings, values, and convictions out of which we live our lives. More than mere beliefs, which are intellectual constructs, religion is an existential construct that permeates the total life of the self.

Theology is the intellectual process of analyzing, clarifying, criticizing, articulating, and symbolizing those values, meanings, and convictions that grow out of experience. In this sense, everyone is a theologian.

Religious education is the cradle-to-grave process by which we grow our theology. The diagram on page xv is based on the developmental approach to human growth. All humanity must pass through essential developmental stages to become mature beings. To become mature religious people, we must also pass through developmental tasks, which are undertaken all the time and not necessarily in any particular order. These developmental stages are: discerning human nature (including one's own nature); coming to terms with one's relationship with Ultimate Reality (by whatever name we call it); defining one's place in the historical process; developing an ethical stance with regard to one's relations to others and the natural world; and creating a meaning or meanings that provide purpose for the human endeavor.

Each of these tasks helps give birth to one's religious philosophy. The essential thing is not so much how one labels these values (for example, whether one uses the term "God" or not), but that these values be understood and made real in the life of the person. This program is largely built on undertaking these tasks.

Human Nature

This theological model has its roots in anthropology; it is rooted in human experience, the result of the tough and tender experiences of life. It was not invented out of whole cloth by academics to confuse lay people. It emerged from people who tried to make some sense out of the world in which they lived.

Historically, Unitarianism and Universalism emerged from a more optimistic view of human nature than was prevalent in orthodox Christianity. We tend to think of human nature not in terms of original sin, but in Episcopal priest Matthew Fox's term, "original blessedness." Have we gone too far? Are we overly optimistic? Perhaps we should think in terms of finite freedom as an accurate understanding of our human nature, finite creatures who err but are free to grow. This basic understanding of our own human nature is our theological starting point. The selves that we are have transactions with various realities. In those transactions we build our theology.

Ultimate Reality

People exist in a cosmic setting. Human nature has its ultimate ground. We live in a spiritual environment. We are integral parts of this cosmic creativity, co-creators with it. There is an old quip of unknown origin that says, "the creed of the English is that there is no God and it is wise to pray to him from time to time."

The question of the nature of God or Ultimate Reality is an open one for us. We know we are part of a cosmic reality greater than ourselves, but we are hard put to name it. For some it is God, for others Nature, or Cosmos, or Creativity, or Being Itself. Some believe that to name it is to diminish it. From the transaction between ourselves and that Ultimate Reality comes values—awe, mystery, wonder, reverence, basic trust, gratitude—and we are moved to a celebration of life.

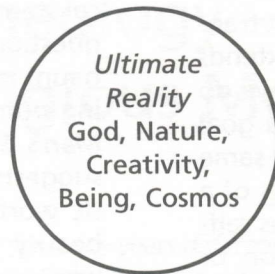
History as the "For Instances" of Theology

Western religion is linear, it is historical in nature. Theology grows out of the historical experiences of people and groups. More traditional faiths affirm an eschatology in which God finally intervenes to end human history. Many Unitarian Universalists would affirm a kind of "horizontal transcendence," looking to no God either within or beyond history as

A LIBERAL RELIGIOUS THEOLOGICAL MODEL

Values

awe, mystery, wonder,
reverence, basic trust,
gratitude—the celebra-
tion of life



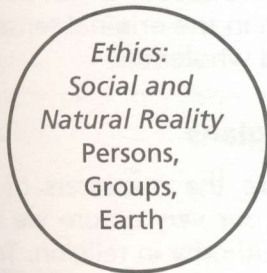
TRANS-
ACTION

Values

Personal ethics: love
Social ethics: justice
Ecological ethics: trusteeship
Reverence for life/Service to life

Values

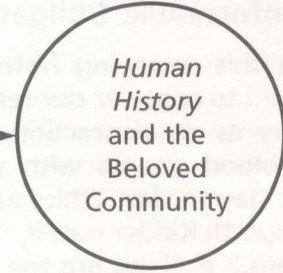
Sense of identity,
continuity, participation



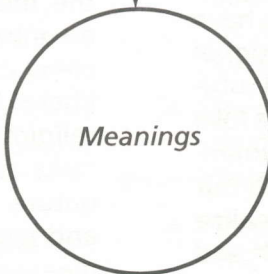
TRANS-
ACTION



TRANS-
ACTION



TRANS-
ACTION



Values

Sense of justification
Sense of purpose
Salvation (wholeness)

a point of reference. Others would see God operating with humanity in history.

One possible point of reference is the Beloved Community of Earth, a vision that transcends our meager efforts, a goal that extends beyond our lifetime, a concept so noble we do not confuse any reality with that ideal, a goal that commands our allegiance. At the same time we are biological creatures, products of a vast evolutionary process that has given us self-consciousness. Are we the goal of evolution, or merely a step along the way? We need a frame of reference that is truly transcendent to our individual lives. From this kind of understanding we derive a sense of identity as part of a biological and historical reality greater than ourselves, a feeling of continuity with a cosmic process and a sense of participation—that we have a role to play in the unfolding future.

Ethics as Meeting Unenforceable Obligations

From this sweeping historical vision we are obliged to consider our relationships, not with history as an abstraction, but with the flesh and blood people with whom we live and work day to day. Ethics are as correspondent Rushworth Kidder puts it, "unenforceable obligations." If "laws are the wise restraints that make us free," as educator James Conant says, then ethics are those inner imperatives that prompt us to care when we need not do so, to act when it may be controversial, to serve when we would rather indulge ourselves. The true test of character is to act when doing so will not do us any personal good—the importance of being good for nothing.

Our ethical responsibility, however, is not merely to the individuals we meet in daily living where love is the supreme value. We have obligations to the larger group, to national and racial and economic groups, and ultimately to the world community. Justice is love distributed, a central concept in how humanity orders its communities. And now with our understanding of global ecology, we realize our moral responsibility to the earth itself and all its creatures. A sense of trusteeship is required if we are to keep faith with the environment in which we are privileged to live.

We Are the Meaning Makers

A final and critical dimension of this theological stance has to do with human meaning. The questions "Why?" and "So what?" continue to haunt us. While there are many ways of exploring human meaning, Viktor Frankl's model in *Man's Search for Meaning*, is instructive. He suggests three sources of meaning: the intrinsic worth of human experiences of love and beauty; serving a cause greater than oneself, whether by raising a loving family, creating a great work of art, or committing oneself to some great social cause; and discovering meaning in human suffering—finding significance in the hurts of human life—physical and spiritual.

Theologians have argued that we are justified—saved—by faith, by works, by character. What does justify our existence in the short years allotted to us? What is the purpose of humankind? What are our purposes? Do we really want to be saved? If not in the traditional sense, then in the original sense of the word—health and wholeness.

We Are the Theologians

As theologians, we are the measurers of all things theological. By our very nature we are the ultimate seat of authority in religion. Take the Abraham and Isaac story in the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham was commanded to take Isaac into the wilderness and slay him as a sacrifice. At the last moment a voice intervened and ordered Abraham to stay his hand. How does Abraham know if the voice is that of Yahweh or of Moloch, god of death? To make that decision Abraham must decide the source of the command. Only he can make that decision.

No, only we can make that decision. We are the meaning makers. We are co-creators of meanings, values, convictions. We live in a community of co-creators. The creation of a liberal theology needs to address these basic religious questions, which are developmental tasks along the life span: human nature, the nature of ultimate reality, our role in history and evolution, our ethical behavior, and the meanings we create for our lives.