

When I was a sophomore in high school, I took a geometry class from a man named Mr. Long. Mr. Long had graduated from college just a few years before, so was still relatively inexperienced, which explained his habit of stubbornly insisting there was only one correct answer to each question. One day, he wrote a problem on the blackboard, called me forward, and asked me to work it out in front of the class, which I was happy to do. And everything went well until, because of his dogmatic personality, he grew upset with my answer.

“That isn’t the right answer,” he said. “There’s only one correct answer and that isn’t it.”

I thought insisting on one correct answer stifled the spirit of exploration, and told him so. But as I said, he was very dogmatic, very doctrinaire, and didn’t agree.

I made the simple observation that his need to always be right was unhealthy, and might even be detrimental to his personal relationships, but he refused to listen, ordered me to sit down, and at the end of the semester gave me a “D” on my report card.

We’ve been talking about religion and spirituality, how religions always begin with someone’s spiritual experience, and is an effort to keep that spiritual experience alive.

After time though, religions have a tendency to harden, lose their elasticity, and become rigid. So what was at first a joyous dance after a while becomes a forced march. The last time we were together, we talked about the goals of religion and spirituality. Do you remember that? We said the goal of religion was purity, which is impossible to attain, so tends to leave us feeling either guilty, when we fail to be pure, or self-righteous, when we think we're pure. But we said the goal of spirituality was maturity, which is possible, and will lead to our growth, wholeness, and joy.

This morning, let's think about questions and answers. Specifically, about religion's tendency to offer answers, usually just the one answer it believes to be the truth, vs. spirituality, whose tendency is toward questions and exploration, holding out the possibility that when it comes to the big things in life, there might be more than one right answer.

Of course, there are occasions when there is only one right answer, but religion isn't one of them. Right or wrong answers are critical in mathematics, in fact we depend on that being so, despite my assertions in high-school geometry. But when we begin to speak about a divine being we've never seen, who by our own admission exceeds human understanding, then insisting we have the "right" answers makes no sense. It simply can't be true. To enter into a relationship with God is to enter a relationship that raises far more questions than answers.

Is that bad? It's neither good nor bad. It is simply the nature of life in the Spirit. It only becomes detrimental when we demand certainty from a relationship that is by its very nature incapable of providing it. Nevertheless, there are many religions that promise certainty, that promise to have the "right" answers to our most pressing questions. When you encounter a religion that promises certainty, use the good, strong legs God has given you and run.

Here is why certainty in religion is dangerous. When religions emphasize answers, when having an answer is all-important, a bad answer will suffice just as well as a good one. Let's look at an example of a bad answer to an important question, an answer still widely accepted in the Christian faith. Here's the question: Why is there evil in the world? That's an important question, isn't it? You bet it is. And what has been Christianity's traditional answer. There is evil in the world because the first people, Adam and Eve, sinned. After that, everyone was born with a sinful nature and that's why there's evil in the world.

That's a bad answer. But it persists, because when religion requires an answer, a bad answer will suffice just as well as a good answer. What is important in so many religions is that there be an answer. Whether it is a good answer or a bad answer is incidental.

Why do people die? Because Adam and Eve sinned, so God cursed us with death. Bad answer. How about this? Because human beings have a shelf life.

Why is there a drought in California? Because God is punishing Hollywood. I heard someone say that the other day. Bad answer. How about this? Because sometimes there are droughts and our treatment of the environment has led to climate change, one consequence of which is drought.

Why must women in some cultures cover their entire bodies? Because God wants them to. Bad answer. How about this? Because some men can't exercise self-control.

Why is my life so difficult? Because God is testing me. Bad answer. How about this? Because every life has difficulties, and sometimes we make really bad choices.

When religions require an answer, a bad one will suffice just as well as a good one. What matters is that an answer has been given.

This is where spirituality differs from religion. Spirituality is content to sit with questions. If spirituality is sitting on the front porch, and a question walks up and sits down, spirituality is content to let that question sit there as long as it wishes until a good answer comes along. Spirituality never insists the question marry the first answer that comes along. In fact, spirituality kind of enjoys having the question hang around, because it stimulates thought. Indeed, spirituality can entertain several questions at once. Y'all come.

I might have told you this story once before. If I did, act like I didn't and act as if you've never heard it. When I was nineteen, I went to the bible bookstore in Plainfield and found a book called *God's Answer for Everything*. It was on sale for two dollars and I was so happy, because I had begun toying with the idea of becoming a minister, had been told I would have to go to college to study theology, but didn't want to because it would take too long and cost too much. Imagine my joy at finding God's answer for everything for only two dollars! That book worked really well for about a week. Then a young man I worked with was hit by a train and killed. I wanted to know if he was in heaven, so I picked up my book, turned to the H's, found the word *Heaven*, read about who was there, and he wasn't. It was a bad answer. I went to his funeral where the minister said my friend wasn't in heaven, but that it wasn't too late for me. That was my first inkling that religion disliked questions so much, it would prefer bad answers over no answers.

Friends, there will always be questions. Make your peace with them. Sit with them. And remember this. It is never wrong, never wrong, to say these three beautiful little words, "I don't know."