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Throughout time, many people have questioned what exactly the point of religion is. We have all probably asked ourselves the question at some point in our lives. Over the past few months in the St. John's Confirmation Program, my classmates and I have learned about the past, deciphered scriptures from many different holy books, and taken educational field trips to immerse ourselves in a different religion's practices to find our answers. We have learned about three main world religions (or "Abrahamic religions," since they all descended from Abraham): Judaism, Islam, and finally Christianity. Both Judaism and Islam have many practices and customs that seem very different compared to Christians, but when it comes to core beliefs, I have discovered that all three religions are more similar than you most likely ever imagined.

So, what really is the point of religion? It isn't just praying and hoping something happens, and it isn't just going to a place of worship and sitting through a service every week. It isn't just reading any certain holy book from cover to cover and saying, "Yep, I'm done." Religion is more than any of these things. Through my experiences in Confirmation Class, I myself have concluded that religion (to me) is about taking the things written in the Bible and spoken about here at St. John's, and trying to apply them to my own life, so I can learn how to be a better person and make positive changes in the world. Each person's take on the "true point" of religion definitely varies, and that is why most religions are quite similar in many ways, but vastly different in others. In Confirmation this year, I learned all about some of these similarities and differences.

Earlier in this year, the first of my field trips was to a Jewish synagogue, located in Williamsport. My classmates and I hadn't learned anything about Judaism yet, so we were there to experience worship in a new place we knew nothing about. The small group of people there were very welcoming and kind, and the rabbi led the service energetically and mostly in English (for us non-Hebrew speakers). That night, I learned that Judaism and Christianity have many differences. For example, the language and liturgy used in the service was a lot more complex than what we hear on a regular Sunday at St. John's. It was mostly in Hebrew, and there were many long chants and songs that were performed, and everyone (but us, of course) seemed to have memorized them. There were also more rituals and ceremonial practices than we normally see at our own church. One of these practices was the elaborate removal of the Torah scroll from the ark (a tall cabinet located where our altar might be).

Those were two of the main differences I noticed, but Judaism and Christianity have many similarities as well. Both have a "Confirmation" of sorts for teenagers to officially join the religion--in Judaism a "Bar/Bat Mitzvah." We also share part of our scripture with Jews, the Torah and the prophets. The Torah is the first five books of our Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Both religions additionally have classes for children as well, but Hebrew School is a lot more involved than our Sunday School. At Hebrew School, students (starting at a young age) learn how to read and write in Hebrew. By the time they are about 13 years old, they know enough to read a portion of the Torah to friends and family in attendance at their Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Hearing the messages and readings at the synagogue made me realize that Jews believe in almost the same “point of religion” that I do as a Christian. They too think that religion is about learning to be a better person, along with also being thankful for and appreciating what you have.

Fast forward a bit, and my class and I are learning about Islam, which originated from a man named Muhammad in the 600’s. After learning more about the history and practices of Islam, we had the opportunity to visit a mosque in Sunbury. There, we had the chance to sit down with the leader of that particular group and talk about what it truly means to be a Muslim and to follow the teachings of the Qur’an. Just like with Judaism, I found that there were a lot (more in this case) differences between Christianity and Islam. Muslims pray *five times each day*, and go through a set of motions and bows facing in the direction of Mecca, the Islamic holy city. Few people are exempt from this practice. The same rules apply to fasting, which occurs during Ramadan. Additionally, the Qur’an is printed in Arabic, so that is the main language I heard being spoken, other than English. But what really surprised me about Islam is that the Qur’an teaches you not only to care for yourself and your family, but also for your community, the environment, and even animals. And the holy book also mentions Jesus as a prophet, and many Christians believe He isn’t mentioned at all. You can hopefully see that Islam has many teachings similar to those of Christianity. Muslims lead a spiritual life of teaching peace, thankfulness, and being generous and selfless.

To conclude, my experiences in Confirmation Class have led me to realize that the point of view of religion is to learn how to be a better person from reading and deciphering scriptures, listening to what is preached at your place of worship, and applying it to your own life. I believe that the field trips I have taken and lessons I have been taught over the course of these past few months have really showed me how I can be a more accepting and respectful member of society, and how even though other religions may seem different from our own, we all have similar goals of peace and generosity in mind. I hope that my experiencing religions other than my own have led me to become a great new member of St. John’s UCC.

JAMES DONLIN

Good morning, all. Religion is a really important part of our lives. If you think of it, we wouldn’t be here without it, because religion is the way we stay with God. But yet it’s much more than any activity, because it helps us speak and stay connected to God. There are many religions, like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism, and they all have something in common, like the way they recognize God or how they have worship services. Though they have stuff related, they also have their differences, like how they worship God or do or do not do Communion.

Another reason why religion is important is because it helps us at school, home, and activities. For example, at school how to react to conflict or how to treat others with love. At home, tradition can help you keep religion present in our lives. Also you may celebrate a birthday or holiday in a certain way. Plus, it can help you in an activity, like

Boy or Girl Scouts, like how to remember the Scout Law and Oath by heart or your doing of the Duty to God Merit Badge, or duty to God always. Also, maybe from what you learned from your religion of church, you can do it with knowing what to do, or you can use religion to help you with the Scout Law and Oath. Say you're having trouble remembering the Law Oath, maybe you follow the Law and Oath in your religion worship service. Also religion can help in a sports activity, like baseball, for example. You're losing 6 to 4, and religion can help keep you humble and mindful of your actions and be a good sport.

Additionally, religion is important because it may help us in the future. Because you may have a new job at work and you have an electronic malfunction. You can ask God to guide you how to fix the problem in a certain amount of time. Also in the future, religion may change, like half of the religions may split or break apart, like how Roman Catholics split, and it may change dramatically throughout the world. Even with what might happen, God remains constant.

Religion helps us through our entire life. Like in our youth, a kid starts to learn right from wrong, and he/she uses that knowledge in their lives, like how to love and respect each other. As we grow, we learn how the religion came to where it is now and how it started, and we use that at work, home, and life. As adults, where we learn more about God and life itself, they use it to know more about God so that you and God become much more than family.

I have learned as a Christian that religion is important because it helps in the future of our lives, as we grow in life, the present time, and how to stay connected with God. I declare myself to be a Christian. Also I'd like to give a thank you to all who helped us through these last five months.

ADDIE MILLER

Hi, I'm Addie, and I was part of this year's Confirmation Class. As a part of the class, we went on field trips. The class itself was engaging, and I learned a lot about the world of religion and where our church (the United Church of Christ) came from.

To begin, I'm going to start by summarizing some of what we learned during the class. The first thing, which was all the way back in February or March, was the story of Abram (Abraham), which was about how he made a covenant with God and went to the Promised Land. Abraham was said to be the primary ancestor of the Jewish religion. Later in life he had two sons--Ishmael, who was born to the mistress Hagar, and Isaac, who was born to his wife Sarah. Abraham is considered highly by the people of the Muslim faith.

It is said that Jesus was born in 4 B.C.E. He was a prophet, a humble man. He was born into the Jewish faith and followed the teachings, customs, and practices of that faith. But he was not afraid to confront and correct behaviors of those whose actions were against God's will. He was a healer and a teacher. He lived a life of service and love for others.

Paul was one of the founders of the early Christian faith, which a thousand years later split in the “Great Schism” into Roman Catholic and Orthodox branches.

Later Martin Luther began the Reformation, which led to the founding of the Lutheran Church. Ulrich Zwingli founded the branch of Christianity we came from.

I learned a lot about the history of our church and all the others around us. Religion is a concept that came about as a result of people worshiping a special being for the purpose of wanting to spread a message to others. Martin Luther didn't like the way of worship at the time, for example, and thought it could be different. Because of people's different beliefs, they will try to spread their different thoughts, even though others might not agree.

People and society are impacted by religion in many ways. The main one is the impact it has on a person's culture and family traditions, whether celebrated alone or with others. I've heard of other people celebrating different holidays/practices in the churches/places of worship that we have visited, or in people's homes, that I didn't know about before.

I want to spend time in church with others so that I will continue to learn about God and Jesus. Part of being a good follower of Jesus is growing in Christ, sharing that love with others and serving others. As I grow up and move on in my life, I will always try to find a place to worship, serve, and learn more about God and Jesus. Also, since visiting different places of worship and learning about other customs and beliefs, I have learned to be more tolerant and respectful of those differences. We don't always agree, but need to be respectful of others.

Finally, I just want to say a HUGE thank you to Pastor Bob for helping us (Erin, James, and me) in our Confirmation into the church and guiding us on our church journey, and a thank you to the collective congregation for all your help with our projects and other support for us along the way. Thank you!