

## THE BEST RELIGION

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Sam Sifton begins his final review as restaurant critic of the *New York Times* with a simple declarative statement: “So this is the best restaurant in New York City.” Sifton gives the accolade to Per Se—not a surprise. When Per Se opened seven years ago, Frank Bruni of The Times immediately awarded the restaurant four stars, catapulting it to the top of the New York food chain, where it has remained ever since.

Dinner at Per Se takes forever: four to five hours on average. Sifton suggests you dine with someone whose company you actually enjoy. It also costs a fortune: Sifton warns that you should plan on a thousand dollars a couple. Actually, if you think about the cost in hourly terms—it works out to about \$100 an hour per person—it doesn’t seem so bad. It’s certainly cheaper by the hour than a plumber, and probably a lot more satisfying.

After all, Per Se isn’t as much about food as it is about rapture. Here’s Sifton describing one of Thomas Keller’s signature appetizers, known as Oysters and Pearls: “The appetizer is not food so much as a poem about creaminess, a meditation on brine, a sculpture about the delicious.” To another dish Sifton responds: “I ate it silently, as one can do only with friends and family, savoring the experience as I might have a massage or a sunset.”

If you’re looking for an experience involving food that leaves you rhapsodizing about sunsets and sculpture, then Per Se may well be the best restaurant in New York City. On the other hand, if it’s 2 AM and your heart has just been broken, the best restaurant in New York City may be the Highliner on Tenth Avenue, where you should order mac and cheese—especially if it’s 2 AM and your heart’s been broken. If you’re a vegan, Candle 79 may be the best restaurant in New York City—no matter what time of day it is or what state your heart’s in.

The point is that any effort to identify what’s best requires thinking about purpose. Food can serve a lot of different purposes—rapture, comfort, and nourishment among them. What’s best for one purpose may not be best for another. Once you decide what you’re trying to achieve in a meal, you can then decide which restaurant is best—fastest, healthiest, friendliest, most sustainable, most creative, most sublime. Or you may decide to pack a fresh baguette, a tub of butter, a few slices of Parma ham, and a bottle of Beaujolais and go on a picnic. Or you may decide to cook at home. When it comes to food, there are many ways to get to best.

As it happens, the same is true of religion—though these days we’re not accustomed to having churches reviewed the way restaurants are. This has not always been the case, however. On October 12, 1874, the *Times* published a review of All Souls and Henry Whitney Bellows, who was then minister of the congregation. The review states that “the congregation has always been noted for the cultivation, solid worth, and social and moral influence it has possessed; also for its stability, amity, and peace.”

The review goes on to say that, as regards the larger and broader application of faith to the public interest, All Souls is among the foremost churches in the community.

“Municipal reform has had no friends so eminent as those this congregation has supplied it, and political corruption, social prejudices, injustice to classes, as well as theological bigotry and narrowness have always met with stern rebuke from its membership.”

The review concludes, “There is not a more worshipful body, judged by external appearances, anywhere to be found than in All Souls Church. It is the resort of intelligent strangers from all parts of the country....There is no attempt to conciliate public opinion here, and no appeal either to numbers, popular prejudices, superstition, or the taste for false rhetoric or low standards of character. Taken as a whole, both Church and congregation justly deserve the high reputation they have long maintained.”

Four stars? Probably. Why? Because All Souls did well what a community of faith is supposed to do. It was a place where strangers found warm welcome, where men and women cultivated moral character and exerted moral influence, where congregants worked to transform society for the good of everyone.

If All Souls were reviewed today, would it be judged the best congregation in New York City? This is a question worth asking for two reasons. First, it keeps us from becoming arrogant in the face of our strengths as a congregation or disheartened in the face of our shortcomings. The truth is that we do some things well and other things not so well. When we look at other congregations alongside ourselves, we see a similar mix of good and not so good. These comparisons become useful when we draw conclusions about what works and what doesn't. In other words, there is such a thing as best practices when it comes to congregations. We can learn from Abyssinian Baptist, and Redeemer Presbyterian, and Temple Emanu-El, and St. Ignatius Loyola, and Marble Collegiate—and we should. We can also learn from other large Unitarian Universalist congregations—and we do. Asking what's best helps raise our aspirations.

There's a second reason to ask whether All Souls is the best congregation in New York City. By asking the question, we make clear that it's okay to ask evaluative questions about religion. Some people view religion as a matter of private conviction; and they argue that we shouldn't question other people's religious beliefs and we shouldn't pass judgment on their religious way of life. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While religious convictions may be privately held, they always have public consequences, some of which are better than others. Because religion always happens within a community of faith, these public consequences become amplified, either for good or for ill.

What do I mean by “religion”? The philosopher and novelist George Santayana once said that the attempt to have a religion without having a particular religion is like trying to speak without speaking a particular language. There is no such thing as religion in general. There are only particular religions, each of which has its own symbols, stories, rituals, and obligations. Each religious community has—or needs to develop—its own unique identity and distinctive way of life. On these terms, religion is the collection of external forms that constitutes our way of life as a community of faith: sacred spaces to provide refuge, music to gladden our spirits, stories to restore our courage, symbols to remind us of commitments we have made, and daily rituals to renew our resolve.

From where does religion come? Most religions point to an ancient (and supposedly divine) revelation—each has its own—as the sole guide to faith and practice

in the modern world. With this approach, only one religion can ultimately be right. Thus the question isn't which is best, but which is right.

Here at All Souls, we try to consider everything we've learned from the past and everything we know about the present as we ask what is best to believe and how is best to live. With this approach, there are many ways to get to best.

The hard truth is that some religious beliefs and practices are better than others. Some are forged by intellectual coercion and maintained by steadfast denial, while others use rituals of shared experience to link the strength of what has gone before to the hope for what is yet to come. As was said of All Souls a century and a half ago, religious communities are places where strangers find warm welcome; where men and women cultivate moral character and exert moral influence; where congregants work to transform society for the good of everyone. When people strive to achieve these ends, they strive to embody the best religion.

When they do, we should award stars. Where they don't, we should rescind them. Being tolerant doesn't require us to tolerate the intolerable. Fighting discrimination doesn't mean we can't be discriminating. Religion should not provide cover for people who champion harmful beliefs and encourage destructive actions.

I'm in the process of launching a blog with the somewhat provocative title "The Best Religion." Its tagline reads: "Highlight what's best, spotlight what's not: the quest to find religion at its best." I'll send you an email when it launches.

The seed of this idea was planted during an email exchange a couple of months ago. Lucia Greenhouse gave two presentations at All Souls about her newly published book *Fathermothergod: My Journey Out of Christian Science*. Lucia is a longtime member of All Souls, and she asked me to write a blurb for the book, which I did. The blurb was reprinted in the Sunday order of service as part of the adult education announcement. I wrote: "Lucia's story is a breathtaking tour de force: riveting, infuriating, astonishing, and ultimately uplifting. It's a must-read for anyone concerned about how religion can confine and control—or enlighten and liberate. Beautifully crafted and compellingly told, this is a story that will linger long after you start breathing again."

Someone who was visiting All Souls that day sent me an email shortly thereafter chiding me for supporting what the email called "a public attack on another religion." My response included the following statement:

When it comes to other religions, I am not one who believes Unitarian Universalism is the religion that accepts all religious beliefs and actions as true and valid. Rather, I believe that some religious beliefs and actions are better than others; our approach should be to put beliefs and actions (our own included) to the test—do they enhance human dignity, build a sense of community, and provide a sense of purpose? Are they open or closed to new knowledge and revelation?

If you've been to All Souls over a period of time, you'll know that I have at times been highly critical of particular beliefs and actions of a number of religious traditions. For example, I have no patience with people who subordinate women in the name of religion, nor with people who deprive children of medical care in the name of religion. Both of these actions violate human dignity (not to mention human rights) and give

religion a bad name. I've also been critical at times of Unitarian Universalism. My goal as a minister is to champion what is best about religion and criticize what is worst.

What's worst? The proposed personhood amendment in Mississippi, which voters thankfully defeated on Tuesday. The amendment turns the moral universe upside down. It says that a fertilized egg always—always—trumps a woman, no matter the circumstances. This approach is both intellectually incoherent and morally perverse. Most proponents of the personhood amendment also champion the death penalty. They abide executing teens, but they want—at all costs—to preserve fertilized eggs. I cannot conceive of a moral principle that could unite these incompatible beliefs. It's certainly not the sanctity of life. Nor is it sanctity of human potential. In large part, the amendment is impelled by fear: fear of what would happen if women controlled their own bodies, made their own moral choices, and defined their own destinies. Using religion to deny the personhood of women is religion at its worst.

What's best? About a year ago (as reported in Friday's *New York Times*), Rick Warren, pastor of the 30,000-member Saddleback Church in southern California and author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, was midway through baptizing 858 people on Sunday, when he had a revelation. He looked at the people he was baptizing and thought, "They're all fat." Then he looked down at himself and thought, "I'm fat."

A week later, he climbed into the pulpit and told his congregation that he'd been gaining about 3 pounds a year as their minister—but he'd been their minister for 30 years. Too much comfort food at too many church dinners, I suppose. "I've got a lot of weight to lose," he said. "Do any of you want to join me?"

Fourteen thousand people at Saddleback and in affiliated churches around the world joined Warren on what he calls "The Daniel Diet," based on the biblical story of Daniel, who rejected the rich diet of the Persians in favor of vegetables and water. Spiritual health involves physical health, Warren insists, and it's easier to get healthy and stay healthy as part of a community. He's right: using religious community to improve overall wellbeing is an example of religion at its best.

Is All Souls the best congregation in New York City? For me, the answer is yes. This is a place where strangers find warm welcome; where we cultivate moral character and exert moral influence; where we work to transform society for the good of everyone. Is All Souls the best it can become? No—which is why you and I must continue, in both word and action, to highlight what's best and spotlight what's not. We're on a quest to live religion at its best.