

THE RELIGIOUS ATHEIST

August 4, 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling

Reading –

The following is from a list by Sam Killerman titled “30-plus Examples of Christian Privilege in the USA.” If you are a Christian -

“You can expect to have time off work to celebrate religious holidays.

It is easy to find stores that carry items that enable you to practice your faith and celebrate religious holidays.

You aren’t pressured to celebrate holidays from another faith that may conflict with your religious values. Holidays celebrating your faith are so widely supported you can often forget they are limited to your faith (e.g. wish someone a “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Easter” without considering their faith).

You can practice your religious customs without being questioned, mocked, threatened or inhibited.

When swearing an oath, you will place your hand on a religious scripture pertaining to your faith.

Positive references to your faith are seen dozens of times a day by everyone, regardless of their faith.

Politicians responsible for your governance are probably members of your faith, the president surely is.

Politicians can make decisions citing your faith without being labeled as heretics or extremists.

It is easy for you to find your faith accurately depicted in television, movies, books, and other media.

You can reasonably assume that people you encounter will have a decent understanding of your beliefs.

You will not be penalized (socially or otherwise) for not knowing other people’s religious customs.

You can go into any career you want without it being associated with or explained by your faith.

Your faith can be an aspect of your identity without being a defining component (e.g., people won’t think of you as their “Christian” friend)

You can be polite, gentle, or peaceful, and not be considered an “exception” to those practicing your faith.

Fundraising to support congregations of your faith will not be investigated as potentially threatening or terrorist behavior.

Construction of spaces of worship will not likely be halted due to your faith.

You are never asked to speak on behalf of all the members of your faith.

Without special effort, your children will have a multitude of teachers who share your faith. It is easily accessible for you or your children to be educated from kindergarten through post-grad at institutions of your faith.

Your faith is taught or offered as a course at most public institutions.

You can complain about your religion being under attack without it being perceived as an attack on another religion.

You can dismiss the idea that identifying with your faith bears certain privileges.

Sermon –

Atheism is everywhere these days; for some reason it scares the bejesus out of people.

The website quora.com asks a question –

Is there an Atheist church?

The headlines this past year have been full of the ‘start-up’ of a new “atheist church” in Britain. There is a “church of atheism” website where one can be ordained for free.

Where have all these people been? All the while Unitarian Universalism has welcomed those I call Religious Atheists. This very phrase makes many people’s heads ache – “Religious – Atheist!” ahhhhh! ☺ Yet there are many religious atheists – many of them found in Unitarian Universalist churches

As you can tell from our reading, many contemporary atheists feel as though they are under attack. Popular atheist Richard Dawkins strikes back; he is so certain of his nonbelief he calls all who disagree blithering idiots; his nastiness doesn’t win him many friends, even among atheists.

So - What is atheism? Not all Atheists agree ...

So-called ‘Strong Atheists’ claim they know, like Dawkins, “there is no god.”

“New Atheists” ‘do not have a belief in any gods.’ New Atheists are agnostic – they claim they do not know – ie, there’s no evidence, that any gods exist.

Many agnostics remain Christian, jewish, muslim – they really do not know or believe fully, but they identify with a traditional religion anyway.

~ Atheism is on the rise in the United States; most nations of Northern Europe contain majorities who call themselves Atheist.

Yet despite the growing atheist tide religion persists in most of the world; very ancient forms of belief and ritual remain popular.

This may be because the cultural and community aspects of faith have not found replacements from the atheists of Northern Europe or anywhere else.

Religion is not only about belief, it is also about service, care, celebration, community, story, freedom, learning, challenge – so religion persists.

Some believe that the human brain has evolved to believe religious doctrine.

I think it is more nuanced – we are wired for religious experience – Theologian

Schleiermacher called it “the spiritual feeling” – we are predisposed to feel connected to

all life, to one another, to something that seems to transcend what we identify as the self.

Since all of us are enmeshed in and conditioned by culture ~ American culture, family culture, ethnic culture, church culture – once we sense this ‘spiritual feeling,’ we explain

that feeling using theories we were taught. For many, if not most, this means that they

will explain their spiritual experiences in the dominant manner used by their culture – for

Catholics, they see the Virgin Mary; Hindus, a manifestation of Krishna; Lakota people,

the Great spirit Wakan Tonka.

It takes work to find original paradigms and metaphors to explain our spiritual

experiences, to go against our upbringing. Despite the ethnic diversity around us, despite the world wide web, culture and tradition persist.

Atheism is about belief – it responds to the beliefs of others in its denial, and it makes the mistake that faith is about faith. It isn't – faith is about covenant, ethics and community. Many Unitarian Universalists identify as atheist, and yet they go to church! These religious atheists in UU churches became saddened by the Unitarian Universalist Association's efforts to 'reclaim' religious language. Of course our seminaries encourage this – UU ministers must be fluent in languages of faith – to not train ministers in the language and symbol of religious imagery is to not train them well for the job. We traffic in metaphor, story, music, ritual and poetry because they express broader truths.

Besides my study of the science of electricity and sound engineering, my training before seminary focused on the art of language. I learned that words do not have inherent meanings. Human beings ascribe value and meaning to words. For instance, there is nothing in the word 'rock' that suggests a direct connection to a hunk of granite; we have simply agreed that for now we will use the letters r-o-c-k as a symbol for that hunk of granite. This does not mean that words do not have power – quite the contrary. But Language's power lies in its symbolic and cultural content. What we think a word represents, and how much we value that meaning, can move us to tears of rage or joy. As such, every human being in every age decides what words mean. Yes, most people accept the definitions of the words they receive – it would take lifetimes to redefine every word in the dictionary. Yet we are always clarifying what words mean for us. We choose certain words to have extended conversations about because they seem somewhat important to us – morality, responsibility, justice, compassion – God.

Freedom is a famous one – for one freedom means the freedom to do as one desires; for another, freedom denotes protection from people who claim freedom means "I can do anything I want." ~ Freedom of religion – or freedom *from* religion. What other words do we not agree on?

I began my career as a minister aware of the ways people, in houses of worship, were being censored and told "you cannot use such words here." Now of course there are 'certain' words one cannot use in church; comedian George Carlin has a skit about such words. But in temples of the Free Faith like ours, when I witnessed people being shunned or chased away because the words that best conveyed for them their movements of soul, the holy reality they beheld, the comfort they had long sought – when I witnessed such 'linguistic/theological correctness' being formally and informally applied, I knew, as did many clergy, that the time had come to embark on a religious project to deepen and enrich our common life. This was when folks began the conversation around the "Language of Reverence" – This included some folks who wanted to purge Unitarian Universalism of all classic religious language – God, worship, prayer, spirit, soul, etc – and those who wanted to reclaim it in our image.

Every person in every age decides what key words will mean for them; the process of reclaiming the powerful language of traditional religious expressions is always worthy of exploration. To be truly inclusive of a variety of divine understandings and our holy mission, we needed to reclaim religious language. Never surrender instruments of power to the orthodox, the establishment, or the extremists. These words belong to us all, and as

such can and should be used, albeit carefully. One minister I know was given a list of about 25 words she better not say, as well as a list of hymns never to sing. On her first 25 Sundays she used one of each of those hymns; On that last Sunday, she showed up with a scroll and listed off all the words she was warned not to use. She is now the head of Worship at the UUA.

A grumbling, fearful Humanist bloc had seized control of our churches and enforced a nasty gag order on words as if they agreed to the definitions of religious right; they utterly, and unscientifically, refused to engage in open dialogue with those for whom that language has resonance in a free church context. No one should ever surrender to such petty, uninformed, nasty naysaying. Often the words those folks tried to ban were the words hurting and broken people needed to hear in order to be made more whole. ~ As for me, no one tells me what to say or sing, nor should they tell you. The whole language of reverence conversation had nothing to do with a creeping theism or “regression” as some detractors claim; it was a corrective remedy aimed at forcing us to live into a wider acceptance of theological diversity.

Words are funny and powerful: Many atheists today embrace gatherings like the annual “Reason Rally” in Washington, DC. But even the word “reason” means different things to different people. Some folks claim ‘reason’ is looking at the evidence, finding those things which can be proven, and deriving rules from that data.” This is an operational definition of reason that works in everyday life; reason as one method of gaining knowledge. But Reason is also a philosophical term, meaning, “the human faculty to compose and use principles; Reason is the very origin of those principles within human consciousness; it is a *creative* endeavor.” And since it is part of how the human mind is constructed then ‘reason itself is not subject to empirical proof; it is akin to intuition.’ Reason is one way we understand the world. Today we are aware that human beings *know* in many ways; there is body memory, emotional intelligence, intuition, revelation, reflection, lived experience, learning by imitation, learning by reading and observation, praxis, etc. Perhaps Reason is the most efficient way to figure out practical and technical problems, but it is not the only way people learn; many have difficulty learning through reason alone. We open ourselves to greater knowing by using more than one learning pathway to truth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19th century Transcendentalist philosopher, decried the “corpse-cold” Unitarianism of his day; he claimed it lacked emotional depth and imagination. In the mid-Twentieth Century a newspaper columnist in Chicago lamented the “emotionless churches of the liberal protestant wing” – and this was true especially among die-hard religious humanists. Today one of the appeals of Evangelical churches is that the emotional self is encouraged, although it can seem an irrational emotionality lacking context or constructive guidance. I am not for a single moment suggesting we start barking like some Pentecostal churches, or rolling on the floor and moaning. There is a huge difference between being irrational and being emotionally rich, appropriate and expressive; honoring our total humanity, the diversity of our learning styles and types of knowledge. Yet none of us are Vulcans [touch ears], last I checked; we shouldn’t pretend we can operate on reason and logic alone because we cannot;

it is more rational to make room for our emotional and embodied ways of knowing.

There is also a difference between seeing the truth when it is made clear and leaving room for mystery when it is not, acknowledging our own foundational assumptions, be they about the scientific method or a preference for poetry and metaphor. Religious atheism has for too long been conflated with scientific reductionism, the belief that we can prove anything given the proper theory and instruments. Many holding such a view say, “if we haven’t proven it yet we should not mention it in church.” Yet here we do not *worship* science, though science informs all good worship. At heart science is a method, a means to an end, as is religion; good religion incorporates science and good science complements good religion. This is because the religious enterprise and the scientific method are two roads heading toward the same truth – there can only be one truth. These two roads have different scenery, they require different methods of travel, they have different estimated times of arrival. At times they appear similar, and at times they are as different as the moon and the stars.

To most religious people in this world, including my beloved interfaith colleagues, I am an Atheist – Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, even atheists - none of them recognize the spirit of life that I call holy as worthy of the title God; I find their rejection an imposition of prejudice. Since the world mostly sees me as an atheist I long for a religious atheism that takes its scientific bent as a given, remains steadfastly focused on searching, testing, proclaiming and revising its truth.

I long for a religious atheism that feels alive, open to joy and praise and celebration
I long for a religious atheism that deepens community life, rich with the proclamation that we all have different ways of knowing and we all can learn from one another, especially because in community we must encounter those who learn differently than us.

I long for a religious atheism that is not so quick to point out how correct it is in all its proclamations and saying, but rather has a robust, confidence tempered by humility.

I long for a Religious Atheism that embraces metaphor, figurative language, story, myth and dreams, that revels in the joys of the body and the beautiful bountiful things of this earth. I long for a religious atheism that is not guarded, or pre-occupied with telling folks what they can and cannot say or do or sing, but is open, and patient, even if it disagrees with the content presented. I long for a religious atheism that always maintains before it the moments of our highest resolve, those things that move us to be our best and remind us that we serve a mission greater than any one of us.

I think I have found that religious atheism – and it lives in the hearts and minds of many of you. It lives in the hearts and programs of churches like Accotink and UU Sterling, as we come together out of love, service and compassion to build a new way of honoring the holy in sacred, caring community.

Benediction/Extinguishing the Chalice –

May we carve here a niche for a rich religious atheism that smiles in awe and mystery at the wonder of it all, that looks with curiosity and humility at what we may never know.