

Atheism in Our Liberal Faith

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One thing that more conservative faiths fail to recognize is that every person is in fact some type of Atheist. Atheism stems from the Greek: "Atheos" meaning "away from the belief in a god or gods". Jews and Christians in ancient Rome were called Atheists for rejecting the Roman pantheon of gods and goddesses. Chances are if you believe in the Trinitarian view of God, you deny the existence of the goddess Kwan Yin. If you follow the God of Abraham like the Jews and Muslims, most likely your life is without Hanuman and Ganesha of Hinduism. Around the world, there are thousands of gods, goddesses, angels, saints, and bodhisattvas that elicit the devotion of some people. In terms of percentages, the Theist who believes in a single deity and the Atheist who believes in none are not so far apart after all.

Atheism is a word that still causes people to gasp. In a world that is increasingly comfortable talking about sex, drugs, violence, and deceit, it is interesting that Atheism remains largely a taboo subject. So much so that the Secular Coalition for America, an association of atheist and humanist groups, offered a \$1000 reward to the person who could identify the "highest level atheist, agnostic, humanist or any other kind of non-theist currently holding public office in the United States."

This challenge led to identifying a Democratic Congressman, Representative Pete Stark of California who chairs the Health subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee. One year ago, there was a press conference in which Pete Stark essentially "came out" as an Atheist. In fact, what he declared was that he is "a Unitarian who does not believe in a Supreme Being." There was a full-page color ad in the Washington Post in which the American Humanist Association congratulated Stark for his "courageous decision" with photos of other famous non-theistic Americans like Kurt Vonnegut.

Some of you may have read in the UU World Magazine that Pete Stark received the Harvard Humanist of the Year Award in September, 2007. He spoke before a packed audience in Emerson Hall with humility and humor, first explaining that although he does not believe in god, the Stark family does recognize a supreme being, Mrs. Stark. Stark does not feel that his announcement was courageous. "What is courageous" he said, "is to stand up in Congress and say, 'Let's tax the rich and give money to poor kids.'"

I agree that Stark's public service is far more courageous than his theological revelation. However, it is important for us to recognize that Atheism remains one of the most misunderstood and vilified perspectives in this country where about 90% of citizens profess belief in God. A February 2007 Gallup Poll showed that only 45% of Americans would vote for "a generally well-qualified Atheist". These types of statistics suggest a common misconception that belief in God is a way to judge a person's character and integrity.

Some of you will be surprised to learn that my decision to become a minister had nothing to do with God. I grew up as a Unitarian Universalist. My parents were active church members. My father served on the Property and Ministerial Search Committees. My mother sang in the choir and volunteered at the UU Women's Federation. We helped out with Coffee Hour, Pancake Breakfasts, and Craft Fairs.

I never spoke to my childhood ministers about it but looking back, each of them must have been inspired by the Humanist Manifesto originally published in 1933 and reissued in 1973. Humanism basically set forth a positive life-stance "guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience." The Humanist Manifestos reject supernaturalism and "affirm our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity."

Growing up in the 1970's, God was never mentioned at First Parish in Waltham, unless someone fell down the stairs. We sang from the Blue and Green Hymnals, titled "Hymns for the Celebration of Life". Our services were indeed a celebration of life particularly honoring the contributions of great men and women, and the cycles of nature.

To give you some sense of the importance placed on ethical development and personal integrity, "decision-making" was a part of the Sunday School curriculum. As an adult, I actually used those skills to make the decision to enter seminary—listing the pro's and con's, considering the relative value of each item. My chosen vocation came from my desire to live a meaningful life, to use my gifts, and to benefit society. Unlike some of my colleagues, I had no sense of being called by God, or any sort of sudden awakening to my destiny. For me, entering the ministry emerged out of my dedication to serving human ideals: justice, truth, beauty, love, goodness.

Although I respect Atheists, I have never identified myself as one in part because of the hostility that some Atheists express toward religion. Personally, I hold great respect for the rituals of many different traditions and value the importance of religious community. I hold affection for the God of my Jewish and Catholic relatives. Humanism affirms my belief in the inherent goodness of all people, the human potential to work for social change, and the healing power of community.

However, over the course of my seminary education, I encountered the limits of my personal power. My brother died suddenly at the age of forty. The excruciating grief over his tragic death and painful life, led me to experience what many call the dark night of the soul. All my usual coping mechanisms that had previously brought me some sense of joy and peace no longer worked.

Since my love and the love of my family were not sufficient to save my brother's life from the destruction of alcohol and drug addiction, my heart was broken. I did the only thing that I could do in order to make it through the day. I prayed. I prayed to a power greater than myself. This life-force called by many names, went beyond the material. I was only able to continue my ministry because I asked for an energy and a love greater than my own wounded spirit and broken heart to move through me.

Foremost, I am a Unitarian Universalist. However, when pressed to define my theology, my answer is that I am a Mystical Humanist. I believe there is a Cosmic Oneness and a working of the spirit beyond the material Universe, known by many names.

In your order of service, you will find information about an upcoming workshop called “Building Your Own Theology”. This Adult Enrichment program is designed for you to engage with questions of meaning and to consider whether your beliefs have changed over time based upon your life experience. By the end of the program, you will have written a Credo statement, articulating your beliefs about the sacred, destiny, human nature, and the afterlife.

Whether you are Atheist, Agnostic, Christian, Jewish, Pagan, Taoist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Earth-centered or some other theological perspective, you are welcome here. Three core values make it possible for our theology to continue to be informed by experience and for Atheists, Agnostics, and Theists to belong to the same religious community. Unitarian scholar, Earl Morse Wilbur, traced these three basic tenets to the earliest period in Unitarian thought. The three core beliefs of our religious movement are **Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance**. Wilbur writes, *“First, complete freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions; second, the unrestricted use of reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition; third, generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity.”*

That is why this morning’s responsive reading encouraged you to *“Cherish Your Doubts”*. Sometimes we are afraid to question especially firmly held beliefs or convictions that others hold dear. The freedom of our faith is open and expansive. It does not reside within the limits of a doctrine that you must profess. However, this liberating perspective means that you also cannot settle for less than the truth. Remember: *The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing.*

Like this morning’s story, our lives are enriched through the use of reason. In continually asking the question about the world’s creation, the main character in Peter’s story learned many answers and a deepening appreciation for other people, nature, and life itself. Tolerance is essential in order to be able to be receptive to the ideas, people, and experiences we encounter through out our lives.

I leave you with a challenge from our religious ancestor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, *“If you believe, suspend your belief. If you doubt, take a leap of faith!”*