

SERMON: Beyond Belief: Atheism and Unitarian Universalism

SPEAKERS: Jennifer Kaye and Tim Veersteeg

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PART 1: JENNIFER KAYE

Before I start my talk, I'm curious to know how many people here today would identify themselves as atheists. If you're comfortable doing so, would you put up your hand? (COMMENT ON NUMBERS)

I think that atheists pride themselves on being a rare breed, even as they bemoan their scarcity. The thinking goes something like this – “Why are there so few of us, when clearly we're right? I guess we must be smarter than everyone else, to be able to see through all that superstitious crap about God and the afterlife. Yes, it's a little threatening to be so outnumbered by believers, but so long as they don't try to infect my secular world with all their spiritual mumbo jumbo, then I say live and let live.”

I know this is how at least some atheist thinking goes because it's how I used to think. When I was in my late teens and twenties, I was a very militant atheist. It was astounding to me that people could believe in God.

I used to delight in having debates with people about the existence of God, and would drive the conversation forward until I heard the words “leap of faith” – which always came forth eventually – at which point I would gleefully exclaim “Aha!” and consider myself victorious. Once someone admitted to the leap of faith, they lost all credibility in my young, self-righteous eyes. They had actually chosen to believe in the existence of a transcendent deity that hears our prayers and intervenes in our lives. I figured you might as well choose to believe in the tooth fairy – at least you get your reward in this life!

I'm glad to be able to say that my thinking has evolved considerably since that time. The very fact that I am standing at the pulpit of this church speaking to you today is a testament to that change. And so I'd like to tell you a little bit about the journey I took to get from “scornful skeptic” to “church lady”, a journey that could only have brought me to the Unitarian Church.

Something that atheists and Unitarians share is a tendency to define themselves through negatives – I don't believe in God, I didn't like what I was hearing in my parents' church, I can't accept a belief in the inferiority of gays and lesbians, etc., etc. Many of us can probably quote a litany of things that we didn't like about the other religions we were familiar with, that eventually led us to this church.

For atheists, this negative tendency can be even stronger, approaching a form of nihilism, although I do not mean to imply that atheism inevitably leads to nihilism. For Nietzsche, nihilism was the result of what he saw as society's repudiation of Christianity. He wrote "God is dead. God remains dead, and we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" For me, the absence of god was a bit less bleak, but still expressed itself in a mild nihilism involving extreme scepticism and an unwillingness to entertain the mysterious as something that adds value to life. So although this kind of nihilistic approach to the spiritual can be liberating in many ways, it can also be very limiting.

The full reality of this struck me in one defining moment about 7 years ago. I was going for a walk with my good friend Cheryl in the early stages of our friendship – when we were still getting to know each other better. We were walking along the Dundas railtrail on a cold winter evening, when everything was still and quiet except for the rustling of our bodies and our voices. I remember it so clearly.

Cheryl posed a question. "What are your spiritual beliefs?" she asked, and I automatically replied "I don't have any." Now Cheryl is rarely at a loss for words, but my response caught her off-guard and she didn't know what to say. The odd part is, it caught me off guard too. It just didn't sound right anymore. I started to backpedal, but not really having a vocabulary to express what I did believe in, I decided to just fess up and talk about my discomfort with what I had said. That conversation really got me thinking. What did I believe? Still not in God, I knew that. But my life experiences as an adult had taught me a thing or two about the nature of human existence – what were they, and how could I articulate them?

So I started to define for myself what my beliefs were. At that time, my primary focus was on the need to minimize one's own ego in order to be of use. I used to say "You have to be small to be big," meaning that if you could truly just get over yourself, you could effect a lot of good in the world.

At that time in my life, I was playing a dysfunctional role of caregiver in both my personal life and my volunteer activities, and so a philosophy based on self-denial fit the bill quite nicely.

Having articulated this for myself, I quickly began to wonder if there were others who had come to this realization and who were actively seeking to minimize the self as a path towards personal growth. So guess where I ended up? – Buddhism. It seemed to be the perfect fit – no inconvenient deity, a central belief that the notion of self is an illusion, meditative practices that were easily learned and conceptually intriguing. So I attended a Zen Buddhist centre in Toronto for a few months, but came to find the practice of Buddhism both overly rigorous and rather solitary, and so I moved on, although I still feel an affinity for most of the Buddhist precepts.

I wish I could say that I immediately turned to Unitarianism, knowing its strong reputation for religious freedom and progressive thinking. But like most other people, I knew next to nothing about Unitarianism, except that a friend of mine had turned to the Unitarian church in Toronto as a gay refugee from Anglicanism. No, my first encounter with Unitarianism took the form of a tourist activity. I was in New York visiting a friend, and I thought it would be kind of fun to go to church – to do something entirely uncharacteristic in a strange city, sort of like getting drunk in a Tokyo bar and singing karaoke all night. Having seen All Souls Unitarian Church on a walk the day before, and being curious about our friend's conversion, we decided to attend a service. And from that moment on, I was hooked.

I came back to Hamilton and started attending our church, drawn by its intellectual rigour, its acceptance of atheism and lack of dogma, its progressive attitude, and its strong community of interesting, like-minded people who are all trying to be the best people they can be. Here, I have found a vocabulary that allows me to articulate and better understand my life experiences as part of a transcendent, collective experience, which to me, is the essence of the spiritual. Now, when someone asks me what my spiritual beliefs are, I can respond positively and confidently, knowing that there is more to be considered than just the existence or non-existence of God.

So that's the part of my talk that pertains to my own spiritual journey from militant Atheist to Unitarian church lady. Now, I hope you will indulge me a

little longer while I share with you one of the pet peeves of many Atheists. I don't often get to stand up in front of a group of people and rant about this stuff, so I'm going to seize the opportunity.

In his little book on Atheist spirituality, Andre Comte-Sponville states that "Rather than religion being the basis for morals, morals are now the basis for religion. This is the inception of modernism." I wholeheartedly agree with this statement. It seems that more people in our modern age are seeking a religion that fits their life experience, rather than molding their life experiences to fit their religion, which seems a lot like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I also agree with Sponville's statement because it acknowledges that one does not need to be religious in order to be moral. In this, his opinion differs from many people's, including the Archbishop of Westminster who stated publicly in May of this year that "The inability to believe in God and to live by faith is the greatest of evils. The things that result from this are an affront to human dignity, destruction of trust between peoples, the rule of egoism and the loss of peace. One can never have true justice, true peace, if God becomes meaningless to people."

The notion that one cannot be moral without a belief in God is one of the most banal and annoying arguments I have ever heard. I can't hear it without rolling my eyes and thanking god that I'm not that simple-minded. I really like the approach to this issue of a woman who blogs under the name Jesus Hitler, the Moral Atheist. In her blog, she makes the following confession:

The day I realized that I was an atheist I went on a murderous, adulterous, blasphemous, idol-making, mother and father dishonoring, Sabbath-forgetting, thieving, coveting, false-witness-bearing rampage.

Enough said.

And speaking of Hitler, I discovered while I was preparing this talk that there is an extensive debate going on about whether Hitler was an atheist or not, with the fundamentalists of course claiming that he was, and the atheists of course, claiming he wasn't. Much better to adopt the approach of Mark Vuletic, a philosopher and atheist who, at the end of an essay

debating the question, sums it all up by saying “So, was Hitler an atheist or a theist? As long as he wasn't typical of either side, I couldn't care less what he was.” Well said.

In closing, I thought I would leave you with a poem by Mary Ann Masterson of the Dallas UU Fellowship, It's an excellent example of a Unitarian expressing an Atheistic point of view in a positive and confident way, and it's beautiful too.

No god I praise No god I praise, From birth to death I only praise the suns and winds and babies kissing gentle in my arms- kissing nights. Books and letters I praise and small fires that warm my cheeks and light the page. My hands are strong and always know how things go together. All these I praise.

Cozy rooms in many houses filled with laughter and good talk, these I praise. Fresh baked dripping honey and monumental strength to lift and carry from continent to continent and back again, I do praise. And sky and sea and sand and friends and friends and I praise round stones.

And oh, the magic gardens, burning their bright colors deep into my heart and turning my body into embers that will glow forever. No god I praise. 'Tis living puts me on my knees.

PART TWO: Tim Versteeg

For me the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus is the central trope of the Christian tradition. Saul, a persecutor of Christians, en route to Damascus to bring members of that sect to Jerusalem for punishment, undergoes a conversion after seeing a vision of Christ. Unable to be accepted in Jerusalem as a Christian, another vision sends Saul, now called Paul, forth among the Gentiles to spread his testimony. Although I was largely raised unchurched, this story is central to my own personal myth making, steeped as it is in ideas of transformations and conversions, departures and journeys.

Now, as this is a service on atheist spirituality, you might guess there are aspects of this story which I have always questioned. Yet as far back as I can remember I hoped that I'd have some kind of similar experience that would solidify my often dodgy faith. If Kirkengard was right and belief

necessarily requires a leap of faith, the problem was that I always looked before I leapt...yet I continued to search for if not conversion, at least commitment, connections and convictions in something more than my own narrow experience of life. Yet if I have trouble believing in the supernatural visions of Saul, I have no less disbelief that foxes and other animals talk, and yet feel there is truth to be found in Fables. One of the things I've figured out for myself is that I carry the baggage of my Western European Christian past and I can't leave it behind...but I can unpack it now and then and rearrange its contents to suit the present journey.

A recent movement in religious studies has been contextual theology, analyzing what your ideological constructs and background are to better define your belief system. If it is relevant for the faithful to examine their contextual framework, I would argue it is just as relevant for me to consider the context of my atheism. Andre Comte-Sponville in *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* argues that his atheism should not blind him to Christ's message of "justice and charity" and I agree. While he first offers, then discounts self-identification as an atheistic Christian, of late I have begun to embrace this possibility, as it seems to be the clearest descriptor for where I emerge from and how I see myself and the world around me. In a way I really haven't been seeking conversion all this time, but it's opposite. I've been looking for the road out of Damascus. I'd been looking for a spiritual home that does not deny the light of reason in favour of doctrinal prescriptions, that was more interested in this world than unprovable promises of a next. In short, I think I was looking for Unitarian Universalism.

While some other progressive Christian churches are also moving in dribs and drabs to a greater acceptance of non-theistic interpretations of religion apart from Unitarian Churches, I can't think of any official recognition of this possibility in other religious communities with their roots in Christianity.

The reading that Jennifer and I shared a few minutes ago, reminds us of our current principles, but these strands in this movement go back much farther. In a book of foundational documents entitled *The Epic of Unitarianism* one finds many examples showing how we have developed from the roots of dissenting Christianity. One of the most recent is "the Humanist Manifesto" written in the winter of 1932-3 in Chicago. This document was signed by over 30 progressive thinkers of the time, many of them Unitarian. "Humanism" it suggests, "asserts that the nature of the

universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.” (140)

So, whence religion in the Humanist model? Article 9 of the Manifesto states: “In the place of old attitudes involved in worship and prayer the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a co-operative effort to promote social well-being.” The call in the manifesto is largely for religion to affect the here and now, and to abandon any dependence/foundation in the supernatural.

In my time as a Unitarian, my journey has metaphorically taken me farther and farther away from Damascus. So why do I stay? The other option for me would be to return to a wholly secular life, certainly for most of the past twenty years that was where I was at. But I’m not sure that that was as secular as it might seem. At Easter I would listen to the soundtrack of Jesus Christ Superstar and at Christmas I’d put up a tree and watch Godspell...while this was the extent of my religious experience for those years, it was framed by cultural Christianity. I remember the days growing up when we said the Lord’s Prayer in public school (albeit the protestant version)...

Secular life for me is limiting...talking about the weather and the last television program you watched is all well and good, but I doubt it makes any of us better human beings. The big questions in life are avoided or left to small hours when we are less than alert and sometimes not quite sober. And for me life is all about these big questions of purpose and action, of love and spirit...not in any way necessitating belief in a higher power, but accepting that the minds we have long to understand ourselves and our world. As Sponville puts it: “That spirit is necessarily corporeal is no reason for us to stop using it or to use it only for paltry purposes! Brains are good for far more than studying maps or ordering products on the internet.” (139) He goes on to illustrate and experiential spirituality independent of theistic belief:

I would say that I, too, have felt and experienced-rarely, but powerfully enough for them to be unforgettable-moments of mystery, self-evidence, plenitude, simplicity, unity, silence, eternity, serenity, acceptance and independence...That, at least, is how I perceive and name them, necessarily in retrospect. At the time, I insist, there were no words. There

was only an experience and it was indivisible. Plentitude, simplicity, silence eternity and so forth- all of this was one. (189)

When I read these words of Sponville I felt a recognition in my own experiences. This is where the head meets the heart and is subsumed by the connection. "Only Connect." E. M. Forster once wrote, while lamenting the near impossibility of that goal.

Could I have found a spiritual path elsewhere? I doubt it. Like the Unitarian Church I am a product of the cultural conditions of my past. The only road back from Damascus for me led to these doors. It is the integration of our principles as something to be applied in our day to day lives; the connections between the messages from this podium every week to the good work the people who are this church do inside and outside these walls. It is the thin line that connects our head and our heart. As a human being, part of a society of other human beings, there is no way I can always live up to the lofty ideals I espouse, but I have a set of 7 principles to guide me in my day to day life and to guide me in my work in this church...I think about what it means to be a Unitarian in all of my actions and I do think it helps me act more thoughtfully than if I was not.

Coming here, being a part of this community, challenges me, inspires me and gives me hope about my fellow human beings...the principles (when I'm able to can live in accordance with them,) keep me connected to the world around me and all people with whom I share this planet. They are not a creed; we don't believe in them the way other faiths have prescriptive systems. But we certainly agree to strive to live by them. I like to think I'm a better person for being a part of this church. I know I've grown in significant ways because of the work I have done here... I have been changed by the experience.

For many years what kept me from making the "leap of non-faith" was the combative vehemence of its proponents... writers like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, the most popular writers of the new atheist position are often single-minded and exclusionary, and even insulting to those with beliefs that are unlike their own. While I may not personally agree with others beliefs in supernatural manifestations of religion, I respect them and need to make sure my actions help ensure that everyone has the freedom to believe (or not) as their conscience sees fit. This is part of the principles of being Unitarian (speaking both to the

inherent worth and dignity of every person and the free and responsible search for meaning...).

Ultimately athiests need to be careful not to get caught in a fundamentalist trap of our own. We need to be supportive and open to other views, recognizing that we are all in the same boat regardless of faith, and that open dialogue will serve us better than silos. Only in this way will UUs continue to be a model for diversity of thought and experience working towards common aims.

Unitarian Universalism in the 21st century needs not factions but facets...those humanists/atheists (and I would put myself in that camp) need be careful not to think theirs is the only way to experience our movement...we need to not make assumptions about each other . Pushing atheist views as the “right” “rational” or “only” way isn’t productive in a church...we are one voice in the chorus. If we are to save the human race we need to work together. Atheists understand this as well as anyone. The world will go on, but the question is whether it goes on with us or without us.