

RELIGIOUS TURBULENCE IN AMERICA

Bob Weekley, for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock, August 8, 2010

More than one-quarter of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion -- or no religion at all, according to the Pew Research Center. For example, ten percent of Americans who were raised as Catholic have left the Catholic Church. Overall, the number of unaffiliated adults has grown dramatically.

But at the same time people who define themselves as *spiritual but not religious* represent the fastest growing sector of the U.S. population. What is going on? Why all this ferment in the world of western religion? Less religion -- more spirituality.

If we can find a way for to understand the meaning of these phenomena, we may understand the cultural dynamics of the western world a little better. And it may give us some perspective on the meaning for our own lives.

Let me start with some condensed, and probably oversimplified, history to help us in understanding the changes in our world that have undermined traditional views.

The underpinnings of the Christian faith with its many branches started seriously eroding in the 1400's. Galileo Galilei looked out into space with the telescope he had created and saw clear evidence that there were other worlds out there. With observations by his contemporary, Nicolaus Copernicus, it was clear that, indeed, Earth was only one of an unknown number of worlds that make up our universe. It seems common and intuitive to us now, but imagine the effect then. It was the death of God's cosmic order as understood then. It threw the entire understanding of existence into chaos. We know the famous story of how the religious authorities of his day forced Galileo to recant his observations -- it was too much for the religious world to bear.

The world of science -- understanding based on observation -- had come into irresolvable conflict with the traditional explanations of life and meaning. Before this, skepticism had been based on intuition, or logical thinking. Now God's Word was being undermined by hard evidence.

Religious faith was able to reaffirm itself to some degree with the scientific achievements of Sir Isaac Newton a couple of centuries later. Newton discovered and defined "laws" of physics that gave his world a quantifiable understanding of the basics of the physical world -- force, mass, gravity, motion, and so on. Ah, a sigh of relief from the priestly class. So, they observed, God has made the world to run according to fixed laws that can be discovered, understood, and calculated. All was well again. The revealed Word of God was the answer.

Alas! A couple of centuries later the world of theological understanding was thrown into chaos again. Newton's "laws" turned out to be only approximations under certain conditions. Einstein revealed a world that was more difficult to comprehend -- a world of curved space; a world where formerly fixed and understood concepts like gravity, mass, energy, and even time were not fixed, but were only relative to the conditions in which they were measured. It got even weirder. In particle physics it was observed that the building blocks of matter could be converted to and from pure energy. And scientists discovered that it is impossible to measure both the velocity and position of a particle at the same time -- Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle.

How can we humans, who see an apparent world, comprehend the "real" world which is relative, indeterminate, and in the ultimate sense -- unmeasurable? How does such a world square with the understandings and doctrines passed down from the middle ages?

But even more discoveries were at play to undermine our confidence that what we had been taught about our world was true. Charles Darwin's explanation for the origin of species, including the human species, was more than many could bear. Over one hundred years later we still have religious organizations in this country waging a dedicated and well-financed campaign to refute the teaching of how the species evolve. They strive to hold on to the ancient story from the deserts of the Middle East and to refute the discoveries of science.

The concepts of good and evil, as imparted by our sacred books, were undermined by Sigmund Freud whose experiments disclosed that we behave as we do for reasons that have nothing to do with divine power. "The Devil made me do it," was no longer a viable excuse.

The traditional religious orientation that permeated life was held in place by a religious explanation for all that exists. As the gulf between science and religion began to rip this religious explanation asunder, so also did the structure of society that had been governed by religion.

In the traditional world, authority was held at the top by an alliance between the political and religious leaders -- the popes and kings, bishops and lords. God was invoked at every level of society to guide the realm from the king, with his or her "divine" rights down to the feudal lords who had been blessed by God to be rich, and down to their peasants whose God-given role in life was to toil, reproduce, and fight the king's wars. Authority was clear, and was represented everywhere by the main architectural symbols of the era -- the castle and the cathedral.

How these old worlds have collapsed is obvious. Clinging to the religious and philosophical explanations of the old world has become an exercise in ambiguous language. But cling to it, many do, because they feel they have no other alternative. They feel it is better for them to live in a world with meaning -- even if that meaning is questionable -- suspiciously irrelevant. The result is widespread alienation and disaffection that has been observed by many scholars of the contemporary psyche. Author and psychiatrist James Hollis discusses, in this vein, "the divided soul of modernism," and the "attendant neurotic misery of modernism" replete with many real-life examples from his patients.

Although many are abandoning the religion they were nourished in, how do so many others cling to the old beliefs that came out of a pre-modern world and the dark ages? What beliefs and psychological exercises do they employ to cope with this unsettled view of the world?

In the western world, one way of reconciling this "divided soul of modernism" goes back to Plato. He taught that we should view the world as consisting of two coexistent worlds -- the material world and the world of the spirit -- the physical world and the spiritual world. Those who were present last Sunday heard some explanation of this in the deep discussion we enjoyed between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

This dual-world concept is essential for religious apologists. Whenever the disparities arise between the modern world we can observe, and the ancient world that people have been taught to believe in, they can brush the inconvenient facts and observations aside by claiming that the world of the spirit doesn't have to obey the laws of the physical universe. All you have to do is believe in the inherited teachings.

Personally I have had a long-standing problem with the concept of *choosing to believe* in something. I can say, "I believe," but either I do, or I don't. I can not make myself believe something I do not believe.

Here is where I see a real problem with Blaise Pascal's famous wager. Pascal was a great scientist and philosopher of the seventeenth century. Many of you are familiar with his famous proposition referred to as "Pascal's Wager." As a scientist, and a skeptic, he had observed that God was an inadequate explanation for the workings of the physical world. But, when considering whether to reject the idea of God and all of the trappings of religion that did not make logical sense, he decided that the best choice was to retain your belief. He reasoned as follows:

The skeptic should believe in God, as a rational decision. For, if God exists and the skeptic believes in Him, the rewards are infinite; if God exists and the skeptic does not believe in him, the miseries are infinite; if God does not exist, it makes no difference whether the skeptic believes in Him or not. Hence, the only benefit comes from believing in God and the only disbenefit from not believing in Him. Hence the skeptic ought to believe.

Now what I would like to ask Mr. Pascal is, "How can the skeptic truly believe? One can *say* one believes, but can one truly believe what one does not believe?" This is the difference between what we confess and what is in our hearts. And if there is an omniscient and omnipotent God, wouldn't that God know that we are an actual skeptic faking our belief?

Perhaps this is where many people profess to exercise their *faith*. Maybe it is not possible to believe something you do not believe, but you can have *faith* that it is so. You know, like, "Keep the faith, brother." About faith, Mark Twain wrote, "It was the schoolboy who said, 'Faith is believing what you know ain't so.'" Former Christian minister, now atheist, Dan Barker stated more bluntly, "Faith is a cop-out. If the only way you can accept an assertion is by faith, then you are conceding that it can't be taken on its own merits." (Barker, a member of the Prometheus Society, has an IQ exceeding the 99.997th percentile, so maybe he's too smart for his own good. But how can he actually believe what he has come not to believe?)

Now there are other reasons that people cling to their religion, even though they may have lost the capacity to truly *believe* in it.

- Churches do good works. Members support those good works.
- Religion may be good for society. Maybe some people need to believe in heaven, hell, and the last judgement in order to be good. (On the other hand I have seen polls that indicate that most prison inmates, convicted criminals, are believers. There are hardly any atheists in prison.)
- Churches provide fellowship and community. People of a similar social or ethnic grouping often find comfort in a church composed of their kind. Some even seek to affiliate with what they consider as a higher social grouping by joining their church.

Religions do sustain group identities and traditions. I have Jewish friends who have no particular theistic outlook but who enjoy all the rituals and conventions of their heritage from *bar mitzvah* to *Passover* and *Hanukkah*. Many of those who are not affiliated with any religious tradition observe the traditions of one religion or another to mark life's milestones -- weddings, funerals, and holy days like Christmas and Easter.

All things considered it is obvious to me why one-quarter of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised. The reasons for the dramatic growth in those who are unaffiliated with organized religion seems clear from the considerations I have mentioned. Then we come to the other part of the question -- how is it that those who call themselves "spiritual but not religious" represent the fastest growing sector of the U.S. population?

A six-year study of college students' attitudes toward religion and spirituality may hold some clues. The study found that for most students, their attendance at religious services *decreased* dramatically

between their freshman and junior years. But their overall level of spirituality, as defined by the researchers, *increased*.

The first question we might want to ask about this study is, what do they mean by *spirituality*? According to the authors of this study, spirituality has to do with the students' search for meaning and purpose, with their values development, and with their self-understanding. Values and attitudes associated with spirituality included: equanimity, the ethic of caring, ecumenical worldview, and compassion.

By the time the students in this study were juniors, three-of-four agreed that “most people can grow spiritually without being religious.” They had come to see the world in more relative terms and in less absolute terms.

Randy Komisar is a typical Type-A, Harvard lawyer, who moved to the Silicone Valley during the go-go years to start up and run a number of companies. He had plenty of ego and financial success. “But,” and these are Randy’s words, “something strange happened along the way. I tripped. I realized that I was all head and no heart; all drive, no passion. I was on the fast track to who-knows-where, but I was increasingly unhappy.”

Mr. “fast-track” Randy saved himself. He began to study with a Zen teacher, he quit his company, and he started on what he calls an “odyssey of self-discovery.” He reinvented his work around creativity, helping other entrepreneurs. Randy says, “For the longest time I was skeptical that seeing was believing. But now I understand that the seeing is done with eyes closed and heart open.”

Seeking spirituality may be a response to an overly materialist culture. One hundred years ago most people had a fairly meager number of possessions. In my genealogical interest I have read some of the inventories of my ancestors who had died. Kentuckian John Weekley’s list included a kettle, a bed, other pots and pans, a mule, a harness, a pair of boots, ... not much else. I would hate to try to make a list of Robert Weekley’s possessions today! But many have learned that acquiring lots of things does not satisfy.

Does this trend toward more spirituality but less religiosity mean that folks have stopped believing in God? Not really. According to the Pew Forum survey of the U.S. religious landscape, eighty-eight percent believe in “God or Universal Spirit” in “absolutely certain” or “fairly certain” terms. Some sixty-three percent believe that their holy book is the word of God.

What do we Unitarian Universalists make of this religious turbulence? I can’t speak for the national organization, but I can say that here at the UUFRR we tend to represent this turbulence. Very few of our members were raised in the Unitarian or Universalist tradition. Most of us came from other religions. Some of us were highly religious in those other churches. Some of us were discontent at an early age and were open to something else. Some of us were actively studying and searching, pursuing comparative religion, philosophy, and theology for answers. Others arrived more by serendipity.

Where have our searches taken us? A while back I gave a talk on the different types of belief in God. After the talk I provided a list of ways that people believe about God and asked those in the congregation to indicate which types of belief came closest to their own. The responses were spread fairly evenly among all of the twelve categories offered. The greatest number, by a significant margin, chose Natural Mysticism -- the belief that we may *directly experience spiritual truths and a unity with the universe without a supernatural being*. Other responses were fairly evenly divided among these other categories:

- Casual Agnosticism -- *undecided about whether God exists*
- Strict Agnosticism -- *we cannot know and will never know whether God exists*
- Pantheism -- *everything is God, and God is everything*
- Paganism -- *affirmation of the Goddess as a metaphor for earth-centered spirituality*
- Panentheism -- *everything is in God, and God is in everything*
- Theistic Mysticism -- *our purpose in life is to be at one with God, letting divinity shine through us in our deeds*
- Casual Atheism -- *the concept of God is unimportant to me*
- Strict Atheism -- *belief there is no God of any kind.*

The lowest number of responses were for Theism --

- Supernatural Theism -- *belief in a personal and supernatural God who participates in one's life and history, or*
- Process Theism -- *God is interdependent with the world and developing in it.*

Not surprisingly, a significant number of our people identified with more than one category -- an indication that their search continues and that their mind is not fully made up.

One of the messages that I glean from this religious turbulence is that there are a great many people who are not comfortable with traditional religions, but who feel that there is more to life than just materialism. Like Albert Schweitzer, people come to have a sense of awe, and a reverence for life that is deeper than religious rituals and dogma. Our denomination is a haven for such people. I am so convinced of this that I think we should not be hesitant to spread the word about a place where *spiritual but not religious* people can truly find a home where others share such a spiritual journey.

Questions? Comments?