

UUFR-VA talk for August 16, 2015

Title: Can You Have Religion Without God?

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Blurb: Albert Einstein said "... I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men." Can you truly have religion without a belief in a God? Is unbelief a belief? What is an atheist, anyway? You might find some surprises in this discussion about the essence of religion.

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We sang this morning about an "old aching God." Yes! I think we have worn God out. And no wonder. God is used for so many things! God is used to divide people; as in "believers" vs. "unbelievers" – the "God fearing" vs. the hell-bound. God is used to promote agendas and validate prejudices; as in "God wants you to ..... " ) fill in the blank. I've heard: God wants you to prosper (often followed by "so send me your donations".) "God wants you to be chaste." "God wants you to worship Him." "God wants marriage to be between one man and one woman." (How did he feel about King David, King Solomon, and the other great men of scripture who had hundreds of wives? He blessed them.) In the recent political debate, candidate John Kasich said "The Lord wants America to lead." Candidate Marco Rubio said that God gave his party "some very good candidates," but not the *other* party. You get the idea. Maybe God gets tired of being used.

As Unitarian Universalists we are not immune from the negative effects of these God issues. When asked to explain what we believe, we are often asked what is our perspective on God. For many this is can be an unsettling question because in our own separate spiritual journeys we have arrived at very personal and varying answers to the God question, answers personal to us that we don't feel we need to tout.

Many of us were born into home environments that introduced us to the idea of God and Santa Clause at an early age. At a later age they let us know that the Santa part was just a myth. Jews and Muslims had one God, Christians had three-in-one. Then, as we matured, we discovered that if we accept what we now know about the material world, the need for explanations that rely God is eliminated. At that point – the question of whether to believe in God, or not, becomes a matter of choice. One chooses to believe, or at least to profess to believe in God, or not.

For many, this transition from belief, to having to choose belief or non-belief, is not easy. Being faced with such a choice often results in a sense of ambivalence and cognitive dissonance. My reason tells me one thing and my early teaching and many of those around me tell me I'm wrong. In America we have God on our money, God in our motto, God in our national ceremonies and rituals, and edifices for God-worship on almost every street corner. To many people, unbelievers are outcasts.

Nineteen out of 20 Americans polled by Pew Research said that they would be unlikely to vote for a secular candidate for president. Americans overwhelmingly said they would vote for a philanderer before they would vote for a non-believer. In my own case, even after I had distanced myself from the religious beliefs and practices of my boyhood and had given up on church attendance I had that gnawing feeling that maybe I should “cover my bases,” just in case. What if there actually is a judgment day?

Whether there is a God, or Gods, or not, many people feel a need to connect to something larger than themselves. Many have the feeling that there is something more to the universe than just the physical, the material. Consider the phenomenon of consciousness. Consider love. Compassion. You can probe all those little wet wires and neurons in the brain and not find consciousness, love, or compassion.

Dostoyevsky experienced this sense of ambivalence, even desolation, as he lost his belief in God. He wrote:

*I look upon myself as a child of the age, a child of unbelief and doubt; it is probable, nay, I know for certain, that I shall remain so to my dying day. I have been tortured with longing to believe – am so, indeed, even now; and the yearning grows stronger the more cogent the intellectual difficulties that stand in the way.*

To me it is tragic for a great writer, thinker, and humanist like Dostoyevsky to be tortured by his unbelief. When we give up magical answers to the big questions shouldn't we be happy rather than tortured? For many, and I apply this to Unitarian Universalists, we have a *faith* that does not rely on supernaturalism, magic and superstition that are at the basis of many of the religions of the world.

Unitarianism and Universalism both grew out of the roots of traditional Christian faith that was focused on God, the creator and master. But in modern times the God-centered aspect of UU belief has diminished. Our treasured Seven Unitarian Universalist Principles do not mention God, but they espouse a *religion* of justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and for each person to pursue their own search for truth and meaning rather than dictating the answers to unknowable questions. When we say that we are “*people of faith*,” that is our faith – standing with each other as we each pursue an uncompromising search for truth, meaning, and justice. That is our faith; that is our *religion*. Whether one arrives at God, or some version of a supreme being, as the answer, or not, is not how we UUs judge one another.

In my promotion for this talk I quoted Albert Einstein who said: *I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men*. Let me add, in providing full disclosure, the context of that surprising comment by a man uniquely devoted to the truth of science. What Einstein said is:

*To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself to us as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend*

*only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of all true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men.*

For those of us with lesser intellectual gifts than those of Einstein, I think about the religious feeling he describes this way: The inspiration found in our natural world – how cells become cells and grow, the complexity of those cells which constitute all of life, the formation of the universe, the amazing complexity of the sub-atomic world, or, closer to home, how the tiny hummingbirds know when to leave for the south and how they find their way, non-stop, across vast distances of land and water and return again to the same back yard -- is it not more awesome to contemplate this amazingly complex world that is beyond our understanding than just to dismiss the complex beauty by saying that a supernatural being does it all? The philosopher Denis Diderot was more blunt: *Whether God exists or does not exist, He has come to rank among the most sublime and useless truths.*

I have referred to our belief in justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and the search for truth and meaning as our *religion*. Going back to my title: *Can we have religion without God?* What did Einstein mean when he said he was a *religious* man? Is *unbelief* in God a *belief*? Can those who do not believe in God be, like Einstein, considered *religious*?

While some people, and dictionaries, include belief in a God or gods to be necessary to religion, and would exclude non-believers, that is not necessarily the case. The definition of religion most favored by scholars of religion, and that I find most accurate, taken from the Oxford dictionaries, is cited in Wikipedia: *A religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to an order of existence. Many religions have narratives, symbols, and sacred histories that aim to explain the meaning of life, the origin of life, or the Universe. From their beliefs about the cosmos and human nature, people may derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle. That is how religion is defined.*

Important and widespread religions such as Buddhism and Taoism, for example, do not proclaim belief in any supreme being. The main feature that distinguishes a private belief from a religion is the acceptance and practice of that belief by others. One may hold a particular belief. That does not mean it is a religion. But if one holds that belief in community with others it is defined as a religion.

Our UU beliefs certainly constitute a religion. And we bear in mind that Unitarian Universalists include a wide range of beliefs about God. Unitarian Universalism also embraces those who believe in earth-centered and nature oriented belief, and others. A long-standing quip is that UUs “believe in one God, at most.” What unifies us as a religion is that all embrace the UU Principles we read together today.

Many people find that belief in a power greater than themselves provides meaning and purpose to life. Many other people do not feel that need. All are valid. Whether

we believe or not is not in our control. We believe what we have come to believe. The reason there are so many religions is because people have come up with so many different answers to these big questions – proof in itself that there is no ONE right answer. Holding different beliefs about God is not a problem – except when the believer uses his belief to disparage others – or to discriminate, or even to kill others because of their different belief as we observe in the world, even today.

A sermon is said to differ from a lecture. A lecture should be informative and hopefully entertaining. A sermon, in addition to being informative and entertaining, should inspire. What inspires me about these thoughts, and I hope inspires you, is that we can lay aside any angst about whether our own particular belief about God is acceptable to others. We are open to sharing and listening non-judgmentally. Our Unitarian Universalist religion is not based how God is regarded, if at all. Our religion is based on agreement on the principles of love, acceptance, compassion, justice, and how we live together in this world. Some people want to draw fine lines on definitions – Christian, Theist, Deist, Humanist, Agnostic, Atheist, ... . Drawing lines divides people, one from another. Our faith, our principles, bring us together.

Bob Weekley  
August 16, 2015