

Among the "Godless"
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Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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READING

"Ode to the God of Atheists" by Ellen Bass

http://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/400/ode_to_the_god_of_atheists

CALL TO WORSHIP

Ron Reagan, Jr., son of the late President, was once asked by Larry King whether he would ever run for office. The junior Reagan said, "No, I'm not really cut out to be a politician... I'm an atheist... I can't be elected to anything because polls all say that people won't elect an atheist."

Elizabeth Dole and her staff also took this to be true-- true enough to launch an ad campaign against her opponent Kay Hagan in last year's North Carolina Senate race.

Dole accused Hagan of being an atheist, a godless American.
Accusing her of taking godless money. Whatever that is!

In response, Hagan came out defending her god credentials by saying that she is a member in good standing at the Presbyterian church—a Sunday school teacher, in fact.

To me, Hagan's response was disappointing.

I wish she would have said and so what if I'm an atheist?
I wish she would have reminded everyone that humanists, freethinkers, and others with non-traditional religious views have been at the forefront of almost every important social movement in our history, expanding freedom to more and more people.

She could have educated the public about the 40 million Americans (American Religious Identification Survey) who don't believe in god and yet have deep faith in the natural world, strong moral and ethical values, and do just as much good in this world in the name of humanity as those who act in the name of god.

Holding the two ideas of godlessness and faith can be challenging, even to open-minded Unitarian Universalists.

Can someone be religious and not believe in a higher power?
Is there a reason to worship in a religious community like ours if you have no sense of god and was not seeking to find a god?

Come, let us think on these things together. Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

I wish Kay Hagan had said something in defense of the millions of non-believers in this country.

But she had a campaign to win, which she did.

Given that she was running in the state of North Carolina I can understand why she might not have felt safe taking on this huge prejudice.

After all, there are few groups more despised than the godless. They're seen by many as lacking moral or ethical grounding, lacking a sense of awe and reverence; as following **only** the call of their selfish appetites, and above all, as supremely un-American.

Fundamentalist Christians have blamed humanists for all of our nation's social ills. Tim LaHaye, one of their prominent authors calls humanists, "the enemy of all pro-moral Americans and the most serious threat to our nation in its entire history!"

In a society that seems to be unable to break out of the "all or nothing" mindset, too many people try to put others into simple boxes—true believers--good, humanists--bad.

Let's not forget that this mindset also works at the other end of the spectrum. There are fundamentalist atheists, cranky humanists who are just as likely to put people in simple boxes—true believers—delusional, humanists—reasonable.

But if you are willing to wade into the gray area between Belief and Non Belief you will find a diverse, complex, and endlessly fascinating realm.

Among the godless you will find thoughtful, compassionate people who live morally without any notion of a higher divine power.

And you will find those who have a sense of the divine, but not a god who created the world, not a personal god with supernatural powers, who brings tornadoes to one house, intentionally saving another.

Among the godless you will find Buddhists and Pagans; agnostics, freethinkers and religious humanists.

Among Unitarian Universalists, humanism represents the largest religious perspective.

Ten years ago, a comprehensive survey reported that almost half of all UUs identified themselves as Humanists. That number is lower today, and I'll talk about that a little later.

Given our respect for reason, skepticism, and scientific inquiry, it is no wonder that many of us are focused on pondering the life of humanity rather than the nature of God.

But how did Unitarianism and Universalism, two Christian denominations, become a religion home for so many diverse perspectives?

To answer this question, we have to travel back to 1865.

At the National Conference of Unitarian churches, a statement was adopted that affirmed its allegiance to “Our Lord Jesus Christ.” Several people objected, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and other ministers and lay leaders who believed that religious truth could be found in many traditions, not just Christianity. And so they formed a competing organization called the Free Religious Association. Thirty years later, the Unitarians dropped this affirmation and never again required its members to profess any creed or doctrine as a test of membership. This created an open door that many humanists later walked through during a time in our denomination’s history called the Humanist Theist controversy.

The controversy lasted many decades, but it started with a fierce debate. The setting was another Unitarian Conference—this one was held in Detroit. The year was 1921. In one corner, John Deitrich, a humanist Unitarian minister from Minneapolis. In the other corner, William Sullivan, minister of All Souls New York City.

Sullivan insisted that the Unitarian faith should stand for a common faith in God. Deitrich said that the Unitarian faith should give up the belief in a supernatural god and come together around a common faith in humanity.

Sullivan might have gained more support for his position, but he got off message and started attacking humanist ministers and then turned on his opponent with personal insults.

Deitrich stayed on course with an uplifting, positive, message that stirred a generation of young Unitarians.

In 1933, students at the University of Chicago and Meadville Theological School formed a Humanist Fellowship and drafted the first Humanist Manifesto. Fifteen short statements affirmed the group’s beliefs, including:

- a “self-existing,” “uncreated” universe,
- the value of the variety of new religious thinking,
- working to promote social well-being and
- the idea that our “acquisitive, profit-motivated society” has shown itself to be morally and ethically deficient.

Almost half of the original signers of the manifesto were Unitarian or Universalists ministers. One of those ministers was the Rev. Lewis McGee. Rev. McGee was an AME minister, African Methodist Episcopal, serving churches in Ohio and West Virginia. He was converted to Humanism after meeting Curtis Reese who had just published a collection of his Humanist Sermons. Later, Rev. McGee would start a new church on Chicago’s South Side called the Free Religious Fellowship.

The original Humanist Manifesto was liberating for all kinds of people who felt oppressed by status quo religions. Among them were many African Americans, Historian Anthony Pinn sees humanism “a repudiation of Christianity, which slaves and others identified with their persecution.” They could not, “reconcile their experience of oppression with the belief in a just and powerful God.”

I heard similar sentiments from those of you who agreed to talk with me about this sermon topic. You told me how you could not reconcile your experiences of personal tragedy and suffering with the belief in a benevolent, caring God.

Several of you told me how living through the events of World War II caused you to turn away from what had been a stable faith in the God of your childhood.

After the war, the second half of the 20th century brought waves of social change, with a new emphasis on independent thought. This encouraged people to move away from traditional sources of authority, and UU lay-led fellowships popped up all around the country. During those years, UUism and Humanism seemed virtually synonymous.

Today, our UU congregations look quite different. You can sense a shift toward a more theistic outlook. The growth in the UU Christian Fellowship is one barometer of this shift.

With this shift in our congregations, some humanists are left asking, “is there still a place for me?”

Several years ago, our association's president Bill Sinkford stirred up those feelings of anxiety when he preached a sermon in which he called for a renewal of religious language. Not God-talk, he said, but a language of reverence.

In part,

he was trying to say if we don't use the language of the dominant culture, then we can't interact with other people of faith, and if we can't interact with them, we will become irrelevant.

At first I agreed wholeheartedly with Rev. Sinkford, but the more I talked with congregants, the more I realized that for many people words like God, Prayer, Spirit, Divine could not be part of their vocabulary.

For them, those words have been either permanently set aside and cannot be reclaimed, or they never held any meaning in the first place.

Either way, we need different words, but the language—the language must still be a language of reverence.

A fact that is not widely remembered from Sinkford's sermon is that the idea of reverence actually came from a humanist. The UU Humanist minister David Bumbaugh

thinks that the “vocabulary of reverence is [part of] humanism, with its emphasis on human study and understanding of the natural world.”

So, is there a place for humanists in our congregation? Absolutely!

The term humanist covers a broad territory of concern for the human venture. There are even Christian Humanists. A Catholic nun describes her humanism this way, “the last thing our lord said was ‘feed my sheep’. He didn’t say convert them and send them to me in heaven. He said feed them. Our life on this earth, she said, is important. God wants each and every precious human being to have all they need for a full life.” (“Sources of Our Living Tradition: Humanism” by Christine Robinson)

For me, humanism is the perspective that best describes the way I understand myself in the world. My ultimate concerns are for other people and for the earth that holds and nurtures us. I care more about the condition of my earthly siblings than about adhering to a set of correct beliefs. I call this concern “ultimate” because it comes from a faith that there is something sacred in the very life that we all share--that we are not, using one of my husband’s favorite phrases, “merely machines made of meat.”

I know that I am a child of the universe, stardust evolved to the point that it is aware of itself. My path in life is to become as fully human as I can in this very limited time here on earth. And that means that I want to live as intensely as I am able, loving, as the poet says, “the virus as much as the child.”

Adding the word “religious” to the word “humanism” brings in our connection with others. Religion comes from the Latin words meaning to “re-connect.” In this community we are bound to each other by the covenants we have made: to care for others, to encourage spiritual growth, and to work together to create justice and ensure freedom and dignity for every human being—no exceptions.

What these all add up to is connection to life itself--rather than isolation and alienation from it.

Religious humanism is a perspective that accommodates my love for Jesus and Buddha and my reverence for the miracle that is my life. It also pushes me beyond my comfortable pathways. Living intensely is not an easy thing to do. Fear, resentment, uncertainty get in the way. Living in right relationship is not always an easy thing to do. Loving the virus as well as the child means that I have to humbly accept the limits of this mortal life, the limits of my body, the struggles I face to enlarge my compassion.

What is miraculous is that we can open our hearts to life-- even with the knowledge of those limits, even with the knowledge of death.

But I ask you, what other way do you choose to spend this one wild life.

There is a faith among the godless.

It is a faith in life itself.

It is a willingness to let our hearts swing open as widely as possible, even when we are suffering.

Our presence in this covenanted community is a powerful statement that we all share this faith--whether we call ourselves atheists, pagan, humanist or theists.

May it Be So

Amen

REFERENCE

Please see [Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century](#) by William R. Murray