

## RELIGION BEYOND THE GOD WARS

A Sermon By  
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[Reading: "The Gods," by Robert Ingersoll, *The Works of Ingersoll Vol.1*, pp. 7-10.]

Just so we get it out in the open, I'm a schizophrenic atheist. Someone once told me I shouldn't use that term, "schizophrenic," because it appeared to put down people with that condition. But schizophrenic is a term that has become commonly used to refer to a split mind, which is its root in modern Greek: *skhizein*, meaning "split," and *phren*, meaning "mind."

I am of two minds about god.

I'm almost always atheist when it comes to certain definitions of god, and, yet, I live as if god were a given, within me and around me. I don't pray, hardly ever, but then, life is a prayer every time I stop to pay attention and feel the wonder of life and am in awe.

So many people in our western world define religion based on belief in god. In our own country, atheists are the most reviled group of people! Can you believe that? In our day and age, to not believe is the most terrible thing one can do. (Gallup Poll, 1999)

Times haven't changed all that much I guess, since Robert Ingersoll said before the turn of the twentieth century that "Nothing is so pleasing to these gods as the butchery of unbelievers. Nothing so enrages them, even now, as to have some one deny their existence."

Long ago, around the time I had my mystical experience, I realized that if there were a god, that god could not, in any way, care less if I believed in it or not. I, one of now, what, eight billion people on earth (?), could not be so important to a god as to have that god smite me down for not believing in it. How arrogant would such a god be? And how unloving. I truly believed in my heart that, if there is a god, that god had to be love, beyond love, beyond jealousy, beyond all our petty human concerns.

I also knew that belief just is. Belief isn't forced. It comes from the depths of our hearts, and if god wants to be there, god is. Or rather, if we want to call that sacred depth of our beings "god," then fine; if not, fine, too.

As you know, so many atrocities have been committed in the name of God, or the gods, that many people cannot abide the word, or the concept. So many definitions abound for God that finding one's way among them is barely possible.

Sometimes I just want to throw god out of the picture altogether! Things would be a lot simpler. Maybe.

Dori told me a story when she heard the topic of this sermon. She was in Barnes and Noble the other day, looking for books some of which were far right and very Christian and others of which were far left and very liberal. The guy at the information counter commented on her choices, and in the context of their conversation, he told her that, in the past years, Christian books were flying off the shelves, but now, suddenly, atheism is the primary subject people want.

Have you been swarming Barnes and Noble?

People ask me what our congregation believes, and I have always said that maybe half were atheists and half believing in some sort of god. I'm hoping to give a better answer next time, after I look at the little, very unscientific, questionnaires you filled out this morning.

There are a lot of atheists out there. And, believe me, we're very good people. I'm wondering about the surge in interest in books about atheism, and whether the new political climate is lifting the oppression we've all been under these past several decades, decades when the Radical Religious Right held sway over our politicians and presidents. Can the days of shock jocks and bigots like Rush Limbaugh be coming to an end?

If there is a breath of fresh air, if we are coming around after the oppression still suffered from the McCarthy years and the John Birch Society, perhaps atheism can have a chance to really be heard, to really share with the rest of the world a path that is fine and good and right, as right as any. And we have the right to choose it, or maybe it isn't even a choice, but a recognition that this is how we believe.

I went to a conference last fall, put on by the Theosophical Society, on Mystical Christianity. They are an open organization that explores different beliefs and ways, and I picked up some books there which caught my eye. One of them is called *Beyond Religion: 8 Alternative Paths to the Sacred*, by David Elkins. The subtitle is "A Personal Program for Building a Spiritual Life Outside the Walls of Traditional Religion."

When I see things like that, it breaks my heart. I wonder why people springboard to the extreme, throw the baby out with the bath water. Because, of course, I know that this traditional religion of Unitarian Universalism doesn't preclude a spiritual life.

There's a quote by an anonymous graduate student in the front of the book. It says, "I am deeply interested in spirituality, in being a spiritual person. But I have no interest in religion at all. I guess you could say that I'm spiritual but not religious." (p. xi)

I've been trying to convince people that if you are spiritual, you are religious, when they've said that to me, almost verbatim, at the door of our sanctuary. I guess I've been wrong, because "religious" is now defined as meaning a follower of one of the religions, whereas "spiritual" means affecting the human spirit. Oh, wait, the definition also says "of or relating to religion or religious belief." Hmmm.

I think the implied effort here is to pry spirituality out of the hands of religious traditions, religious organizations, religious communities, and religious leaders.

Elkins says that “a spiritual revolution is quietly taking place in our society.” Well, I wouldn’t say it was that quiet. He goes on to say that “millions of Americans have left traditional religion to pursue alternative paths to spiritual development. They are realizing that they can be spiritual without being religious and that they can nurture their souls without going to church or temple.” That’s very true. And then he says that, “This separation of spirituality from religion is one of the major sociological changes of our time and is at the heart of the greatest spiritual revolution in the West since the Protestant Reformation.” (p. 9)

I wonder if this is why we’ve had such a swing in the pendulum over the past few decades toward the Radical Religious Right and its fear-mongering against liberals. It’s like a rift in our society, to witness people leaving their religious communities and finding spiritual sustenance and social action in other arenas. The disaffection with dogmas and warring definitions of god have led many to just up and leave a way of life that has guided humans for millennia. And I wonder what religion beyond the god wars might really be like.

For Elkins, it is a state of no religion. He writes, “The first step [towards spiritual maturity] breaks the container of our own tradition and opens us to other religions; the second step breaks the container of religion itself and opens us to life. When we take the second step, we see that all of life is sacred and that the entire universe is a garden from which we can nurture our souls.” (p. 15)

I think Unitarian Universalism’s container was made of flexible fabric, a kind that formed in only certain areas of the world and the soul. Somehow, it didn’t shatter, but expanded, and expanded again, so that it could continue to be a haven for those who wanted to explore the larger view of god, even of no god, and know that all life is sacred, and the entire universe a garden. Emerson spoke often of the power of nature in spirituality. He was probably our greatest Unitarian minister.

Huston Smith is a theologian who attended the Berkeley Unitarian church when I was in seminary. He was inspired to write a book on *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. He, too, seems to equate religion with belief in something. He writes that, “Uncontaminated, religion is a noble word; deriving as it does from *religio*, to rebind, the word targets what religion is essentially about. But...it has lost some of its respectability. Mention the word in public and its sins are what jump first to mind.... Enter the word “spirituality” to name (without specification) what is good about religion.” (p. 255)

We are struggling with the role of religion in society today. It’s far reaching and affecting many faith traditions. When I went to England to the British Unitarian ministers retreat three years ago, my colleagues told stories of how hard it was to be religious in an increasingly secular country. People there just didn’t have the desire to go to church or understand the value of religious community.

It got me thinking about what aspects of Unitarian Universalism will continue to be attractive to people in the future, if any. Are we flexible enough to grow with an expanding view of god, spirituality, and the affirmation of atheism as a right path of just concern?

I found a quote in Elkins book, by Thomas Berry: “Future and past cannot live off the present forms of religious experience for these are too shallow; the future can live only from the most primordial communion with the sacred.” (p. 61)

My father used to preach that beneath each of our religious structures is a common ground, and when we dove deep enough, we would find that commonality to connect us, to bind us, “religio,” religion. Some call that god, some call it spirit, some call it the sacred. And some just call it life.

Carl Sagan wrote (and he attended a Unitarian Universalist church, too), “A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.” That’s from Jennifer Leigh Selig’s book, *Thinking Outside the Church: 110 Ways to Connect with Your Spiritual Nature*. (p. 155) Selig doesn’t advocate leaving religion altogether, but has compiled a wonderful book of quotes and reflections on spirituality for those who want to think outside the box.

I hope we aren’t a box. But maybe every religious tradition is a box. Maybe that’s the nature of a tradition, to shape our world view with ritual and habits of behavior and thought. We aspire to be open, to affirm and promote the spiritual growth in one another, to accept one another. That’s one of our seven UU Purposes and Principles. But how well do we do that? How well do we create an atmosphere where beliefs are respected and grappled with in an honest fashion?

Whether you are an atheist or a theist, you are welcome here. And if you’re schizophrenic about it, you’re encouraged to let that be as well. The universe is far more amazing a place than we should argue about, or even to go to war over, definitions of god. Your spiritual growth, or deepening of personhood, to put it another way, can happen within these sacred walls if you and we so desire and make it happen.

For it is so, as William Blake wrote, “To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an Hour.” It is aspiring to be, not to define; to experience, not to confine.