

Sermon – Atheism, Theism and the Path of Spirituality

Rev. Lori Kyle February 5, 2023

Some of you may remember that I received my Master of Divinity degree at Emmanuel College, one of the seminary schools within the University of Toronto.

Emmanuel has an affiliation with the liberal United Church of Canada denomination so this is where most southern Ontario UU ministerial candidates go to get their MDiv degree. Of course there were far more United students in my cohort than UUs, but there was a handful of us UUs.

Usually the theological differences between the UCC students and us UUs didn't get in the way too much. It wasn't until the day the final assignment of our Sacred Gatherings class was announced that those differences came front and center.

Before retreating to the far side of the large classroom to observe the circus that ensued, our teacher informed us that we were to create a worship service that we would later conduct for the entire school as part of a semester-ending celebration. It took less than a minute for the theological wrangling to begin.

A UU student started with: Do we have to call it a worship service? I mean, who's being worshipped? Can't we call it a sacred gathering? A United replied: If you're not worshipping at a worship service, then what do you do during your 'sacred gatherings'?

Well, things only went downhill from there.

At one point in the banter a UCC suggested we include an intercessory prayer to Christ. My UU buddy Sam quickly responded that Christ isn't central to our faith, and we certainly don't pray to him asking him for stuff. Our Christian counterparts argued some, but then relented because the role of Jesus, after all, they said, was to point people on to God.

You can guess which side then said, "Do we have to call it 'God'? That's so old-school and patriarchal. Couldn't we just call it "the Universe"?"

The United folks dug in about this, arguing that a worship service that omits God is a contradiction in terms. "Yes, there's someone we worship and it's God...hello!" A UU woman then suggested that we compromise by referring to the divine as Goddess, at which time several of the UCC's rolled their eyes.

At the point that some UU suggested calling it the gender-neutral “Spirit of Life” a United student whose patience had worn thin shouted, “You wacky New Age Unitarians are clearly threatened by anything remotely religious or traditional!” “Yeah,” piped in another, “Why don’t you Unitarians drop out of divinity school, join a hippy-dippy book club and call it good?”

Remember now, that the teacher had been in the room observing this whole time. At the point that the gloves were starting to come off he wisely and abruptly made his re-entrance to the group when he raised his voice above the others in the room and sternly said, “Enough!”

And then he walked slowly, deliberately to the front of the class and turned to give us a prolonged (too long) admonishing gaze. In this classroom that for the last 20 minutes had been filled with banter-turned-accusation word-slinging, you could suddenly hear a pin drop. I, for my part, started intently studying the binding on the textbook in front of me so as to avert his unwavering glare. You see, I may or may not have been one of the last students to speak when I somewhat audibly muttered that *both* sides needed a good group therapy session.

When our instructor finally spoke again, just before dismissing us for the day, he said just four words...*Where is the holy?* Every one of us in that room knew what he meant -

Unless we could access within ourselves the presence of the Holy - that which supersedes the trivial nature of these hotly-contested religious details – unless and until we could internally access and bring that forth, we had no business creating - much less offering - a sacred service for others.

Ah, the contested/contentious details of religion.

You might know that the term “religion” is derived from a Latin word meaning *reconnection*, Re= to do again, Lig= ligament..connection.

It denotes that we were once connected but have somehow become *disconnected*. And so this concept of *religion* is the reconnector.

Religion reconnects people.

I get that that was the game plan back when.

Religion, in its purest form, is the quest that has been defining our human journey since before we could even conceptualize how to get reconnected to a larger kind of reality that lies beyond the mundane daily. And so we gravitate toward religious institutions, including our

own UU one here, in hopes that somehow something might occur to assist us in finding the thread between who and where we are and who and where we are meant to be.

Fair enough. **But** we come into this process with a deep flaw. We, generally speaking, have lost the ability to tell the difference between this sacred quest, and the finite vehicles (otherwise known as religions) we use to embark on the quest. The ongoing human search for deeper connection and enlightenment is sacred. The temporary vehicles we utilize to help us get there...not as much. And yet, in our imperfect nature we often exalt the means of transport instead of the profound journey itself... resulting in countless lives being taken through the centuries in the name of 'my religion's god'... the same deity whose purpose is for reconnection.

It's all fairly absurd when you think about it.

And again, it's because as a species we've prioritized the entry-way instead of the significance of moving *through* the entry-way to arrive at a place beyond. Things meant to be metaphoric symbols become concretized in our belief systems, resulting in fantasies and reality becomes intermingled and confused. If history means anything, one knows these vehicles called religions either transition into other religions, or just fade away like the Ford Thunderbird or Chevy Nova.

I know many people who would likely not agree with this metaphor. My mom I think wouldn't, because I know that she believes that not only Christianity, but more specifically her Roman Catholicism is The One True Religion (big O, big T, big R) ordained as such by God. The danger in this type of belief system is that the soulfulness, the "holy" referenced by our worship teacher can fade out of the religious experience because it becomes more about the trimmings.

This reminds me of a Thanksgiving dinner my aunt was hosting some years ago. Several of us in my generation had asked if we could bring a significant other and that was fine. But there were some dietary variations from the guest list. One person was lactose intolerant and therefore couldn't eat the creamed dishes, and my aunt creamed everything except the cranberry salad. There was a vegan, so how in the world could *that* person be fed a main course? (no one in my family had ever heard of tofurkey).

Having to move beyond the confines of the closed system of the family had shaken things up, and the spirit of celebrating gratitude, of *reconnecting* with loved ones and welcoming new ones, was all but lost because of focus on the trimmings instead of the connecting.

You can tell when a person gets this bigger-picture, vehicle versus quest stuff. Our sacred Spidey-sense picks it up, we're wired to recognize it, even if we're not consciously aware of our recognition. The detected "it" here is true quality of character that has little to nothing to do with religious affiliation.

Take Mohammed Ali, for example. He converted to Islam, but so what? He isn't revered today because his religious affiliation or even completely for his athletic skills, but because of integrity that led him to devote his later life to hunger relief, cross-cultural and interfaith understanding, and the commonality of basic human values.

Do you hear those beautiful non-religion-specific words ...commonality of basic human values and understanding?

Another example...the Dali Lama..The world doesn't recognize the holiness of the Dali Lama due to the Buddhist label on his robe.

Ghandi isn't recognized for being one of the world's greatest ambassadors of peace because he happened to be Hindu. In fact, he spoke to this when someone was giving him trouble for his understanding of those who were opposing his Hindu group. When asked if he was even still a Hindu, Ghandi said, "Yes I am, I am also a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, and a Jew." Ghandi was also known to say, "God has no religion."

Everybody knew the saintly Mother Theresa was Catholic. But who cared? What we cared about was her deep concern for poor and forgotten people in the streets of Calcutta.

Princess Diana's religious affiliation wasn't even part of her persona, and a saint she probably was not. But we largely looked past the private 'stuff' and loved this woman because of her work in the world on behalf of people with AIDS and banning landmines.

We humans, we're a funny lot. Tell somebody about a humanitarian, and we recognize the goodness. Tell someone about a humanist (often known to be 'atheists)– those who are perceived as 'godless' and people mistakenly think "No god-ness, no good-ness."

But, as Christian scripture and other holy writings say....God is love. The action, the movement, the vitality here is the **love** part. If you prefer to have an assertion of a deity (which is great if it helps you along your spiritual path), it is imperative that you also have the presence of love.

I have this visual that the gods of the world's religions are like the faces of dignitaries we put on money, which, as we know, are replaceable. The value of the money is inherent, regardless of which group puts which face on which coin or bill. Imagine the folly if the value of a \$20 bill was based on Andrew Jackson's face being on it.

The bottom line, my dear friends, is that when we get to the very foundation of all our religious questions, we've arrived at a place beyond religion. Oh, the irony.

As a visionary accustomed to looking into the beyond, astronomer Carl Sagan would say, "For small creatures such as we the vastness is only bearable through love."

May the gods that are the whispers of love and grace ebb and flow in and around our lives, while we make our way down life's path. So may it be.

And now it's time for our community dialogue.