

## Religious Cynicism

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith  
First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah

**September 7, 2008**



## Religious Cynicism

September 7, 2008

There's a true story about one of the great liberal religious thinkers from back in the third century in Alexandria. A fellow named Origen. At the age of 17 he was prepared to leave home, speak the Christian truth through the lens of reason, and accept his fate as a martyr. His mother, however, thwarted his plans of leaving home where he would face certain persecution by...hiding all his clothes. (so much for the naked truth). Can't you just imagine the arguments between mother and son? Give me my clothes. You're not old enough to be a martyr. You can't tell me what to do. [Some things never change] I think it's Origen's mother who should be in the pantheon of great historical women for introducing us to Parent Effectiveness Training.

Origen did...eventually...not only retrieve his clothes, but become a great scholar and is credited with being the first Universalist when he claimed that everyone universally would find redemption, not just Christians, and for that matter, not only good people. Everyone. Everyone would be reconciled with God. His writings would later be condemned as heretical as was the custom then and as it sometimes continues to be in our enlightened times as well. I tell you honestly – the radical feature of Unitarian Universalism flows from the Universalists side of our history. People these days still resist the notion that God loves all people, holds no prejudice, makes no judgment. God would not have been selected as McCain's running mate last week in St. Paul.

It is easy being cynical about religion, is it not? Joshua stopped the sun in the sky to allow him more time to slaughter his enemies. I don't think so. Jesus was conceived without the benefit of a male donor...the fetus of John the Baptist leaped to salute the fetus of Jesus when the two pregnant moms met...the night Jesus was born angels split the night sky, behind which they were presume to have lived, in order to sing to the hillside shepherds. We can only assume the angels knew how to sing in Aramiac.

It is easy being cynical about religion, especially when armed to the teeth with science which easily debunks all the assertions of a very human-like god who meddles in earthly history, and who astoundingly has the time and interest to invest in the minutia of our everyday lives. But ask Sarah Palin, and she will tell you as she did in her church last June, that it was god's will that the federal government contribute to a \$30 billion gas pipeline she wants built in Alaska.

God is silent in the face of millions of people infected with the HIV virus around the world...God is silent about the polar ice cap melting, the seas rising, New Orleans drowning...never mind about starvation in Darfur. But God does manage to communicate to Alaska's governor that what He really wants to see happen is a gas pipeline in Alaska. It's easy being cynical about religion.

There's a touch of irony, I think, in that Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, were all devoted Christians. We know how cruelly the church received their insight, but for these revolutionary thinkers, faith and science were compatible. God's revelation was embedded in the natural world – his handiwork, they would argue. Let's try to make sense of it, discover its laws, and we will, in the process, move closer to an understanding of god. But religion obscures the pathway to truth, nervous that new insight will undermine religious authority. Religious authorities depends solely on the shaky conviction that they and they alone either speak for God or that they and they alone have the capacity to explain divine

behavior. It's no wonder that religious authorities are very nervous about new information that may well preclude their singular power to interpret -- God. And so religion remains stuck in the quagmire of a pre-scientific world. And thus we experience this huge gulf between science and religion where religion explains the origins of the cosmos through mythical stories and continues to relate to God in very human terms.

It is easy being cynical about religion not only because it flies in the face of reason, but because of the violence perpetrated in the name of God. God has favorites we are told and how comforting it must be to feel that God watches our backs. How many devastating wars have been fought and continue to be fought in the name of one's God? Sarah Palin continues this horrific pattern by pronouncing the Iraq war as "a task from god."

It's not my intent to discredit the Republican vice-presidential nominee despite the fact that as mayor in her small town of Wasilla, she sought to have books banned from the local library and threatened to fire the librarian. Origen's mother wanted to keep her son safe from people like Sarah Palin. You see the supernatural God, the theistic god, the god who comes to our aid and keeps our fears in check remains alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The God that calls for our perpetual dependence, who decides our punishment and rewards, who determines who will live or die, who controls the hurricanes and tsunamis and earthquakes and thus will restore our world to ecological balance when He deems it's time...this god is still found in our churches as though Copernicus never existed, the enlightenment dismissed as an insult to divinity, and reason ridiculed as the road leading straight to perdition.

So why do we find ourselves this morning in church? I am always left speechless by those who hail Unitarianism because they say they want nothing to do with "organized religion." Granted, without a dogma we may seem a little disorganized and chaotic, but we do have a history extending back to the Protestant Reformation; we do have a theology that proclaims unequivocally that the Creation is holy and we are its stewards. We believe strongly along with former UUA president, Bill Schulz, that the blessings of life are available to everyone, not just to those who memorize creeds or follow a doctrinal script. It may depend on your definition of "organized," but we are not -- despite public perceptions -- a "believe whatever you like" -- kind of church.

Our UUA principle calling upon us to "respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" is a case in point. We believe that human beings are not masters of Creation, but simply one more expression within the complexity of Creation which we hold sacred.

Why do we find ourselves in church despite our own religious cynicism? I appreciate very much what my colleague Jane Rzepka once observed...that we are people who seem first to lose their religion, and then by means of private struggle, find new ways of being religious. Through a process of theological reinterpretation and in many cases a personal revolution, people in our churches are searching for ways to continue their religious lives. So in a sense aren't we all like Copernicus in saying: "Look, just because the earth really revolves around the sun, I still consider myself a religious human being."

In story after story told by newcomers shopping for a church...somewhat suspicious, a little cynical perhaps, but exploring this church nonetheless, I hear huge personal struggles of wrestling with a prior religious faith that compromised their own intellectual integrity. And they want to discover if it's even possible to find new ways of being religious. Is it possible to believe that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive?

I believe one of the compelling avenues that Unitarianism opens to everyone in this quandary about honoring scientific evidence while the beat of a religious impulse remains undeniably strong, is our

belief that the Holy is not mysteriously hidden from us but quite the opposite – the holy is displayed in the real workings of the world.

Thus our cynicism about religion...thinking it's really only deceptive fiction... (our cynicism)begins to diminish and fade as we pay closer attention to the profoundly religious sensibilities of caring for one another, creating a just and peaceful world, and healing the planet which has been abused by selfish greed as though human beings actually held dominion over the creation as written in ancient stories going back 3000 years.

Our call to religion is not about following an archaic blueprint. Instead, we try to somehow comprehend, together with our fellow seekers, just how to find a way of being in the world that manifests all we hold sacred. How do I become an agent for justice and love? How do I diminish my own ego needs and learn the selfless art of responding to the pain of others? In Unitarian Universalism, we believe it is not enough to save ourselves. We may not involve ourselves with intercessory prayer asking for special favors, but we do believe most deeply in intercessory acts...our acts interceding on behalf of those who suffer.

That is why we “organized” the Office of Gay and Lesbian Concerns back in 1970. We are all equally part of Creation’s magnificent wholeness. That is why UU’s marched in Selma, and why we witness publicly against war. That is why under the leadership of our current UUA president, Bill Sinkford, we proclaim to stand on the side of love in our support of undocumented workers. If creation is all of one piece, then why must any one people suffer?

It would be misleading, however, if the “religious” is painted purely in activist terms. There is much we must come to terms with on a deeply personal level. What in life gives us meaning and he can hold as ultimately sustaining? As the Zen writer, Charlotte, Joko Beck begins one of her books: “My dog doesn’t worry about the meaning of life. She may worry if she doesn’t get her breakfast, but she doesn’t sit around worrying about whether she will get fulfilled, or liberated, or enlightened. As long as she gets some food and a little affection, her life is fine. But we human beings are not like dogs...we are caught in the contradiction of finding life a rather perplexing puzzle which causes us a lot of misery, and at the same time being dimly aware of the boundless, limitless nature of life. So we begin looking for an answer to the puzzle.”

I don’t think it’s possible to summarize why all of us cynics find ourselves in church. We all have our own personal reasons. But I will share one brief story, an account written by Elise McKay, that helps me understand why I am here...and perhaps it will make sense to you as well.

I know a man, she writes, who killed himself because he lost his hat. Of course they say he was crazy, but I think not. I think he just had all the losses he could take. He said as much as the wind lifted his hat from his head. “O God,” he said. “Now I’ve lost my hat, too.”

The church is where we go to retrieve our hats or learn to live without them. The church is where we go to tame the wind or learn to love it.

That’s why we’re here. It’s really personal. Yes, we want to work for justice and we have visions of global peace. But we are also aware of being caught in this rather perplexing puzzle called life. And when our cynical friends who are such progressive thinkers ask: “Why is a person like you going to church?” - - - why we don’t exactly tell them the story of the man who lost his hat. And we don’t exactly share stories of the winds blowing in our lives. Or how we try to come to terms with an unconventional ecclesiology. But here we find courage and companionship and love. The church is where we go to retrieve our hats.

Most of us have had to first, lose our religion and then find new ways of being religious. We are here with our private struggles, our own theological revolutions, and amidst our doubts and cynicism trying real hard to continue our religious lives.