

RELIGION FOR CONTEMPORARY PEOPLE

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, a group I like to refer to as the blessed trinity of atheism, would certainly consider religion for contemporary people an oxymoron. They would have no patience for such a concept. "Contemporary people," I would imagine them to say, "have no choice but to reject any reference to a supernatural deity who guides our footsteps towards a certain destiny and shakes his finger at us when our thoughts are impure. I think we would all agree with this. But the infamous trinity of iconoclasts reduces religion to a narrow scope that only accepts religion as meaning Biblical literalism and a seething hostility towards scientific inquiry.

James Wood, writing in the August 31st issue of the New Yorker, describes this new zeal among atheists as assuming (incorrectly) that faith must by definition be blind – an irrational closing of the eyes to evidence and reason, a leap of faith into an infinite idiocy. The new atheism concludes that there are no intelligent religious believers and that any working scientist who professes to believe in God is probably lying, or is distinctly subpar.

My Unitarian church in the borough of Queens where I grew up worshiped atheism, and the stalwarts of the church impressed upon every visitor who entered that they were in the right place provided that they despised religion as much as everyone else in the congregation. As a kid, the mantra I learned regarding faith was the same mantra that evangelicals preach today in their sex education abstinence program: Just say no. It really is an amazing parallel: faith is bad for liberals and sex is bad for conservatives because either way you break ironclad rules and will disappoint those who love and care for you.

Queens has a dense population of two and a half million people. Surely there must be enough liberals to keep the church not only operational, but thriving. In 2006, my home church closed its doors; I am surprised they lasted as long as they did.

I believe the calling of Unitarianism, the mission of the church, the honey that draws us to worship can only be understood as contemporary rational people seeking to fill a void - -a void that hungers for religion, but a religion that undermines neither intellect, science, nor good old common sense.

People are earnestly seeking a religion relevant to these contemporary times and have left their traditional churches where they felt terribly alone and out of place and could only survive all the God and salvation stuff by following the dictum: Don't ask, don't tell.

The struggle to keep religion relevant is not a particularly new endeavor. Offering an ancient revelation with its professed geological wisdom conceived in a pre-scientific world, demands that we wake up to a new religious understanding. While the age of faith still survives in the age of reason, modern worldviews emerge every now and then, kind of oozing out of the flawed cosmology that clashes with incontrovertible evidence to the contrary.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer attempted to realign religion with the modern world sixty years ago. He was a brilliant young theologian who played a huge role in the Hitler resistance movement in Germany. He was captured and executed in 1945 shortly before the war ended. In a letter from prison he wrote a piece that has (quite honestly) baffled theologians ever since...although I find it blatantly obvious what he's trying to tell us. He wrote: "Only a religionless Christianity could be meaningful in a world come of age." Is that so hard to understand? I don't think so.

Maybe it takes a Unitarian to decipher that religionless Christianity is not an oxymoron just like religion for contemporary people is not an oxymoron but makes perfect sense. We live in a world that has come of age, a marvelous description by Bonhoeffer where modern consciousness has evolved beyond superstition. A world come of age accepts science as dislodging the supernatural from its exalted place of fear and power, and blessings are understood not as signs bestowed upon the chosen but that the blessings of life are available to everyone. The sacred and divine are manifest not in miracles but in the simple and the everyday.

The religious consciousness that once included ideas about transcendence and providence are regarded now by our modern consciousness as "unreal." **Human beings** are responsible for this planet and its future. This is what we accept. But...do we not also ask if there is more to life than biology, chemistry, social environment, and other measureable finite forces? Is there not another dimension to this human clay that cries out for understanding and meaning beyond the materialism?

My dear colleague and friend, Forrest Church, captures the essence of our religious searching with two comprehensive statements. Neither insults the mind:

(1) Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. (2) We are the religious animal; knowing that we must die, we cannot help but question what life means.

Forrest is currently dying of cancer. He has been struggling with this for about two years since his diagnosis. He's half a year older than I. While watching the raging fires in southern California on his television set before speaking in the Unitarian Church in San Diego, he said:

When the roof caves in or a trap door swings, people who are allergic to all-purpose bromides, especially theological ones—"It was God's will, a part of God's plan, and everything turns out for

the best"—operate at something of a disadvantage. As one who does not believe that God gave me cancer before shifting his attention to Southern California where he exercised His omnipotence by torching thousands of family homes, I receive little comfort from the assurance that God knows what he's doing when he plays with matches.

So where is God in all of this? Commingled, I believe, with the victims' tears. God doesn't torch houses, will entire cities to disappear under the floodwaters, or sentence toddlers who wander too close to the family pool to drown. I could not worship such a God, even if I believed in him. But I don't believe in him. With the star to person ratio at 1.6 billion to one, my God is not a puppet master pulling every string above this tiny globe as if the universe turned on how we behave here. Greater than all and yet present in each, no less mysterious than the creation itself, God is not the cause of our undoing but the cosmic ground of our being. The God I believe in saves not by destroying but through healing. When we recognize our tears in each others' eyes, God is with us; God's rod and staff they comfort us; God brings us peace.

Forrest speaks directly to contemporary people seeking religion, does he not? This is why we have Unitarian churches; this is our role and purpose. For me the void that people wish to fill religiously, the void that beckons our search and makes us restless in our lives, the hollow spirit within that desires some direction if not answers, ponders (quite simply) how we might find love, meaning, and courage in the face of an otherwise cold and indifferent universe.

I do not hesitate to say that we are here in this chapel as religious people, but religious people with solidly rational minds. We want to understand, though understanding is too strong...we want a glimpse perhaps, at how we might find love, meaning, and courage in our perplexing and complicated lives situated in an indifferent universe.

Our religious mission, then, is to humanize society. If our hearts and hands give shape and meaning to history and our future then we must summon the courage to make life more fair and equal and loving to all...to humanize this intolerant society. Sounds like a liberal agenda. Seems like only liberals talk about finding love, sharing love, and standing on the side of love. Who else? The mythic God is pathologically

judgmental in this world of pluralism and diversity. Religion for contemporary people, on the other hand, jumps right into the fire of injustice in order to humanize society with love.

Our faith makes explicit our task to serve the human family. By serving the human family we recognize the tears of others as our own and we thereby feel the presence of the Divine. God's love is not about MY salvation where I feel special. My faith insists that divine love manifests itself in justice as a response to oppression and exclusion.

Why else has this church worked so fiercely to secure the civil rights of gays and lesbians and transgendered? Because faith and justice are joined in contemporary thinking. Our moral responsibility – humanizing society ---is to heal everyone who hurts and alter the structures that diminish human life.

Why else has this church worked so fiercely for immigrant rights? Because we find our tears mixed with the tears of those whose families are separated and deported and imprisoned and who are denied basic human dignity and the right to food, housing, and health care.

And as the choir sang, "What is this Church?" with the words, "A place of love and gladness where we all meet to seek the common good," I thought to myself that sometimes (even) we forget that. This church is a treasure. The people resources here have served this valley nobly for the past 118 years. We have inherited a great legacy whose future depends solely on us.

Because this church is a place of love, the steering committee and building committee have tried to bring everyone in this congregation under the same tent in our capital campaign to build for the sustainability of growth while meeting sustainability goals environmentally. The mission of the campaign is to ensure that the liberal religious voice and principles and resources we currently carry forth in order to for humanize society will continue for generations that might close out the 21st century and beyond.

Our committees have tried to accommodate everyone: To preserve this beautiful historic chapel, to build a zero net-energy sanctuary that will seat double what we can fit here, to make the kitchen larger and more efficient for church events, to remodel our social hall to 4000 square feet so more organizations working for peace and justice can find a home here, to build an edible garden, a space for youth, and even an office for a second minister.

After years of focus groups and organizing the plan, we officially launched the capital campaign last September and have encountered what might be called "economic interruptus." So much momentum had been sustained nevertheless, culminating now in a huge push this fall. But too many nay-sayers have begun to thwart the love that guides this church by distorting the real progress of where we are today. Let me

set the record straight with no sugar coating, just the facts: To date, 80 families have pledged \$1.8 million; 30% of the architectural fees have been paid; \$25,000 have been poured into audits covering two years; \$15,000 have been paid to a grant writer; we still have half a million in cash collecting a few pennies in interest. The cost of construction has plummeted and if we act fast, we will save \$1.2 million over the original estimate. We plan on breaking ground this coming March. Here's the best news: We still have 140 families who have not yet pledged. Because of financial hardship we expect the number is closer to 100 – 120 although one bonafide very poor student did not just pledge but actually gave the capital campaign \$1000 of her own money. So everything is possible. The canvass continues.

The tent is large enough for all of us. It makes the preservationists happy, the environmentalists happy, the cooks happy, the children happy, the gardeners happy, but most fundamentally – it will make the Salt Lake Unitarians who will fill this place long after we are gone – very happy...and grateful that we preserved the legacy of liberty and justice in this valley.

So let's get the campaign done and live in harmony with one another again. We have too much to lose if we don't come together and understand that for churches to survive into the near future, they need to be large enough to sustain a staff and energy-efficient to sustain the high cost of heating and cooling. Or else they fold, like a church I know in Queens, N.Y.

This church, from its very first minister David Utter who scandalized Salt Lake with his lectures on Biblical criticism, to Jacob Trapp in the 30's who introduced this congregation to the concept of spirituality in a scientific age, to Ed Wilson in the 40's who rattled this town with his Humanist Manifesto, to Hugh Gillilan who offered meaning and substance to this congregation during the divisive years of the Vietnam War, to my predecessor Dick Henry who accepted my invitation to chair the capital campaign to build the religious education wing completed in 1993, to our present commitment – our overwhelming commitment to humanize society through our work with the International Rescue Committee, our partnership with Mountain View Elementary School, our work with Equality Utah, sandwich making to feed the homeless, and ecumenical work fighting on behalf of undocumented immigrant.

And all the while, in worship, in adult education classes, in our caring committee and social justice council, in our music and work with children, we gather to be touched by the sacred experiences of joy and appreciation, and awe and wonder and hope, and the possibilities of love. And all the while we question how we might find this love, meaning and courage in a cold and indifferent universe, And yet, in our work together, we catch infinitesimal glimpses of love and courage forging some meaning in our lives. And that's what brings us together, finding religion as contemporary people.