

THE CHALLENGE OF SECULARISM

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When I was a little girl, I attended Sunday School at the Central Presbyterian church in Brantford, Ontario. At the beginning of each class, we said, “Our Father who art in heaven...” One day, I was given a picture to colour of the old man with a white beard standing in the clouds. Linked with the prayer, this image constituted my idea of God throughout most of my childhood. I imagine that some of you had a similar experience.

I graduated to more sophisticated God studies at university where we spent an inordinate amount of time in my Philosophy class learning the five proofs for the existence of God. I remember feeling very foolish as I rhymed off these so-called “proofs” on the final exam. Was this what university was for?

As I grew older and struggled with how to live a good life, I remember addressing silent prayers to that Being in heaven when the going got tough. Needless to say, I never received a reply, nor did my situation improve. Clearly, prayer as I had imagined it was not the answer.

In my forties, I was lucky to discover a Quaker meeting in Geneva where I was living at the time. Sitting silently, listening to the quiet breathing of others, chasing the thoughts that flew through my mind, seemed a more spiritual experience than the repetitive rituals of the organized churches I had attended - Anglican, United, Presbyterian.

It wasn't until I discovered the Unitarian church in Ottawa in the 80s that I began to feel I had a structure within which to explore my spirituality. By that time, my feminist consciousness had been raised and I learned from authors like Mary Daly how Christianity was a patriarchal structure that had denigrated women throughout the ages. So that was it. I knew I was no longer a Christian. But if not a Christian, what was I?

I spent the next several years exploring alternatives: the goddess, paganism, humanism, pacifism. You name it, I tried it. Finally, I decided that none of these worked for me so I became a nothing. I swam in the sea of unknowing until one day I finally woke up to the fact that I was an unbeliever, in fact, an atheist. Fortunately, the Unitarian church is forgiving and welcomes all those who subscribe to their principles, even atheists, so I was OK.

Does this sound familiar? Have some of you followed a similar path? What does it mean to be a Unitarian in this age of religious challenges? If we are now a secular faith, are we a religion? In an e-mail to me, Shawn says, "We may not all believe in god, but we do a lot of things that look and feel like what other religious people do."

Here's a bit of history. Socrates was condemned to death for "corrupting the youth of Athens" because he questioned the existence of the gods. In our western canon, he was the first atheist. Socrates also questioned the idea that morality flowed from the gods. Secularists still today debate where morality lies in the world if god does not exist.

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, has written a BIG BOOK called *A Secular*

Age where he outlines his theory about the nature and properties of secularism. He describes how people long ago were embedded in their religious existence so that everyone in the community thought the same about their spiritual teachings. In Western Europe, during the Middle Ages, there was only one religion managed by the Roman Catholic church. To disagree with its teachings was to be a heretic. Being embedded meant that you believed in the supernatural – the power of ritual, the “magic” of artefacts to cure or bring about desired events. Bones or blood of a martyr would help. God was near in the chaos of weather, good or bad. Special places like groves or streams had the power to alleviate suffering. It was, in Taylor’s words, an “enchanted” world.

Society was highly organized. Taylor describes medieval monasticism as divided between the two worlds. Monks took care of the transcendent issues of communion with the Holy Spirit. They communicated with god on behalf of the community through continuous ritual prayer; parish priests took care of mortal souls. Holy days were celebrated by the whole community with occasional feasts to let off steam such as Carnival or Mummer’s days. Many religions still exhibit these characteristics.

I was in South India last spring visiting Tamil Nadu and Kerala. One evening, as we were returning by bus to our hotel, we entered a village where the whole population of some 20,000 souls were out walking on the main highway. Women in beautiful saris with children in tow, men and boys laughing and waving, flowed by our bus. Food stalls and rest areas lined the sides of the road. Our bus driver explained that the village walked around their sacred mountain every month at the time of the full moon. A three- hour pilgrimage that would be completed before dark, it was a very moving experience to see this collective worship. Indeed, these

people lived in an enchanted world.

During the later Middle Ages, reformers began to question the collective pressures to conform. With the Reformation, the “disenchantment” of the western world began. People questioned the authority of the church, and then, began to turn away from the rituals and “magic” thinking of their religious traditions. Some remnants remain: the presence of God in the Host, pilgrimages to Lourdes, the sanctity of the holy books. But Protestantism rejected the enchanted world in favour of self-definition, individual religious experience and the abandonment of magic thinking.

By the fifteenth century, the Unitarians were in the forefront of this process – announcing at great cost to life and limb, that they no longer accepted Jesus as the Son of God, nor did they believe in the Holy Ghost. Universalists rejected the idea of Original sin and the concept that salvation was only for god’s elect. We are all good and we are all saved. To some Christians, Unitarians were and continue to be heretics.

There are those, including Taylor, who argue that we have lost a significant part of our spiritual heritage by abandoning the “enchantment” elements of our experience. He speaks of the “fullness” of the theistic faith. In fact, some people try to revive this sense of fullness by reinventing rituals, or returning to former deities. For example, goddess worship is pursued by some women whose experience with the patriarchal god has been fraught with denigration of their worth. Pagans recreate ancient rituals to connect with the earth, now more important as our planet is so threatened.

Unitarians also struggle with the challenge of secularism. In another new book

called *the Joy of Secularism*, Philip Kitcher suggests that “religions have a long history of practice. They can draw, often brilliantly, on resonant words, forms of ceremony, art and music,.. and the “services” of Unitarianism frequently seem “anaemic” by comparison.” (p. 55) If we are a collection of individuals, each with his or her own spiritual path, and defending our right to differ from our neighbour, how do we create a collective spirit? What binds us together into a “beloved community”? This, as I understand it, is the challenge of secularism.

In my view, one of the weaknesses of our current position is the emphasis on Reason. Historically, reason was enlisted to combat superstition, to dislodge the wisdom of faiths from the supernatural. The claims of science, and of the Darwinian theory of evolution demanded the use of reason to develop the tenets of the modern world. But this emphasis on reason has often led people to leave out, or shun, the expression of feelings, particularly negative feelings.

Humanism has filled the gap to some extent but as a “religious” expression, it seems a bit of cold porridge. Attempting to address Charles Taylor’s critique of secularism as lacking the “fullness” found in Christianity or Judaism is Alain de Botton who has written a challenging book called *Religion for Atheists*. He asks important questions of us: How do we deal with guilt, depression, remorse? We have no confessional. We have no Day of Atonement. We have no process for collective repentance or absolution. Botton says, “If we want well-functioning communities, we cannot be naïve about their nature. We must fully accept the depths of our destructive, anti-social feelings.” (p.65)

“Can we reclaim a sense of community without having to base it on religious foundations?” Botton asks. (p. 25) Religions understand that to belong to a

community is both very desirable and not very easy.

“We become dull to others (as they do to us) when all we seek to do is assert how well things are going for us.” he says, “ just as friendships grow when we dare to share what we are afraid of and regret.” (p.35) Creedal religions have communal rituals to mediate between the needs of the individual and those of the group.” (p. 58) Judaism focuses on anger and creates the day of atonement for resolution of social conflict. The day itself is an opportunity to say “sorry”

Catholicism focuses on guilt and the need to confess, to be absolved. Catholicism recognizes the loneliness of the individual and creates a ritual to help reintegrate the individual into the community.

Buddhism begins with the simple premise that the world is full of suffering. Our task, through Buddhist practice, is to end our suffering and, to the extent possible, the suffering of others.

Botton says, “A good community accepts just how much there is in us that doesn’t really want community – or at least can’t tolerate it in its ordered form all the time.” (p.66) He argues persuasively that we might borrow from religious institutions to create “secular entities that could meet the needs of the inner self with all the force and skill that corporations currently apply to satisfying the needs of the outer.” (p.280) The challenge is how to separate ideas and rituals from the religious institutions which have laid claim to them. For example, Christmas is much more than a ritual marking the birth of Christ – it offers themes of community, festivities and renewal.

We need to discover how to generate feelings of community, how to rethink strategies of education, how to acknowledge our own childlike needs and how to dislodge the wisdom of other faiths from the supernatural. It is possible that we may not achieve the “fullness” that Taylor talks of but perhaps there will be other comforts.

Botton examines other humanistic concepts that might enrich our experience of secular faith:

Kindness: We need to recognize that the needs of the child never entirely disappear and that we were feeling beings long before we developed the capacity to reason. “It is not very kind, nor ultimately very freeing, to be deemed so grown up that one is left alone to do entirely as one pleases.” (p. 96) Secular society leaves us free but untethered. We need rituals to bring us together. For example, the Zen Tea ceremony is a collective experience of honouring a long tradition by paying attention. Buddhist collective practices of watching the breath join people together in a ritual of profound importance.

Tenderness: Catholicism has recognized the need for comfort and support in the image of the Madonna and child to whom adherents pray. While this activity has become exaggerated and borders on a cult, it recognizes an important fact: we remain “vulnerable and pre-rational in our hearts.” (p. 76) Secularism’s emphasis on reason leaves us bereft if that is all we receive when we acknowledge our suffering.

Pessimism: Christianity locates hope in the distant sphere of heaven. Secularists are more optimistic. Countering pessimism, they believe it is possible to perfect life here on earth – embracing such concepts as economic equality, human rights,

democratic politics. The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem acknowledges the sense of loss and sorrow at the state of the world. But with no god, we need to wail our sorrows together. I would like to wail at the thought of the possible environmental damage the Northern Gateway pipeline might create.

Perspective: The concept of god allows for the idea of transcendence. Without god, secularists must find transcendence elsewhere. The pictures from the Hubble telescope transmit the glory of the stars and the cosmos, truly a transcendent vision. More down-to-earth, each of us has the memory of a beautiful scene in nature – of mountains or the sea. I believe secularism may contribute to the “re-enchantment of the earth” as a possible strategy for our survival.

Art: Throughout the Middle ages, art was practiced in the name of the sacred. But museums have stripped sacred art of its theological content and placed it in rooms for the observation of patrons. Christian art reminds us of what is important – the sufferings of the flesh and the pain of death. Botton argues that museums need to rethink how art is presented. For example we could create Galleries of Love, of Fear, of Suffering.

Architecture: One of the most obvious differences between Catholics and Protestants was manifest in their architecture. Where Catholics created soaring cathedrals with many visual representations of the story of Jesus, Protestants turned their backs on this grandeur. They emphasized the Word as central to the practice of their faith, with the elevation of Reason to follow during the Enlightenment. Secularists no longer create a home for the gods but Botton suggests we might create new temples to reflection, to education, or create sacred shrines and retreats to address the needs of our souls. Have we succeeded here in

creating a temple to address the needs of our souls?

Institutions: Finally, Botton addresses the need to find new ways to enhance secularism. He suggests we borrow from other religions what might fit for our 21st century world to create new religious institutions that address human needs outside of politics, the family, culture and the workplace. We need institutions that foster and protect emotions – a “Religion of Humanity” according to French philosopher Auguste Comte. The challenge of secularism is therefore: how to generate feelings of community; how to acknowledge our own childlike needs; how to rethink education and art to serve this new paradigm.

I’m not sure how to answer these questions but I feel they are worth pondering. My own personal search to feel connected has sometimes felt affirming, sometimes alienating. I love the flower communion. I see the bouquets as a manifestation of our connection to each other. I experience the mystery and awe of the candlelight service on Christmas Eve as we look into each other’s eyes above the light of the candle.

How do you experience our expressions of religious faith? What would you like to see more of? Less of? Do you sometimes feel our services are “anaemic”? Or does everything we do just fit for you? Do we achieve Charles Taylor’s “fullness” in your view? Or not? For those in flight from creedal and patriarchal religions, would borrowing from these religions be perceived as back-sliding?

Whether or not we succeed, the significant thing is that we continue to search, to create collective experiences, to reach for deep and moving expressions of the meaning and challenges of life. Unitarians are voyagers on a sea of discovery. We

may not all agree all the time, but we try to be tolerant of the opinions of others since we are all in the same boat. Is this what religion is all about?

Exploring these questions is the challenge of secularism.

References:

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
2. Philip Kitcher, *Challenges for Secularism*, in *The Joy of Secularism, 11 Essays for How We Live Now*, edited by George Levine, Princeton University Press, 2011.
3. Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*. McClelland and Stewart, 2011.