

“A Serious Religion for Serious People”

Rev. Sara E. Ascher

3 December 2006

“Once upon a time, at a Sunday service in one of the very big Unitarian Universalist churches in Boston, a young man was making a ruckus in the back pew. After every sentence the minister spoke, the young man shouted, ‘Amen! Halleluiah!’

One of the ushers approached the man and spoke to him discreetly.

‘Sir, uh, we just don’t do things like that here.’

‘But I got religion!’ the young man replied.

‘You certainly didn’t get it here.’

~~~~ ~~~~ ~~~~

“Oh, I have a great deal of respect for the Unitarians,” said Robert Cushman in 1912. “They don’t believe a goddamn thing and they live up to it every day of the week, Sundays included.”

~~~~ ~~~~ ~~~~

“Unitarian Universalists worship gods of all different creeds, cults, and peoples indifferently.”

It’s great to have a good laugh at ourselves! It is always healthy to not take oneself too seriously and to be able to look at the absurdities of the extreme elements of our behavior and beliefs. But what lies behind these quips of humor at our own religious expense? Are these jokes, and the many like them, really funny or do they point to something profoundly wrong with our tradition? I think the jokes that get shared around about Unitarian Universalism are funny because they are both true and they also illuminate something just a little uncomfortable about ourselves.

Take our propensity for coffee. “Once a upon a time, an Evangelical Christian congregation bought an old building that had once been owned by a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Some workers were making repairs when they came upon a coffeepot in a niche in the back of sanctuary.

‘It’s true!’ shouted one of the workers. ‘They do worship the coffeepot!’”

The joke implies that instead of some divine entity or being we hold coffee as the one thing of life to be worshiped. And maybe for some of you that is true, but what lies beneath this seemingly harmless joke is the accusation that we as a religious tradition do not hold anything as Holy or Sacred above a strong, hot cup of self-satisfaction. And I ask you, is this our religion?

And what about our hymn singing? “Why are Unitarian Universalists the worst hymn singers? Because they are always reading ahead to make sure they agree with the words.”

How many times have you read over a hymn I (or other worship leaders) have chosen and thought “What the heck is this?” I don’t mean those hymns that are unfamiliar and musically difficult, I mean those hymns where your throat starts to close up when you try to sing words like ‘God’ or ‘Lord’ or ‘Amen.’ And I imagine for the choir the tendency to balk at certain songs is even stronger, because they often sing pieces that may be in opposition to what they personally believe.

The joke here is that we are so busy ensuring that we agree with the language of the hymn and that we are so wrapped up in our own personal preferences of verbiage that the larger experience of singing with others is lost. The accusation here is that we cannot endure even the slightest *perception* of an *imposed* belief. Is this our religion?

“‘What do you mean, it’s a creedless religion? That means you don’t believe anything, right?’

‘No, that’s not what it means.’

‘So, what do you believe?’

‘Well, for one thing, we believe in a creedless religion.’”

So we don’t believe anything, right? We have no creeds, no dogmas, nothing that says by this measure you shall know that you are a Unitarian Universalist. “I’m not even sure I am a UU, but I suppose that removes all doubt.” According to this joke we don’t even know *if* we are what we say we are because we don’t even know what being a Unitarian Universalist means to begin with! Is this our religion?

Unitarian Universalists don’t believe what others believe, instead we state emphatically we have absolutely no idea what the heck we do believe! “A Unitarian Universalist very earnestly disbelieves in almost everything that anybody else believes, and he has a very lively sustaining faith in he doesn’t quite know what.”

We waffle, we are not committed to any idea of faith because we cannot adequately or otherwise name what it is we have faith in. When we claim to have faith it is shallow and shifts with the tide of political correctness. Is this your religion?

“I would rather be golfing or fishing or sewing or gardening or sleeping or reading the newspaper” should read the bumper stickers on the back of our shirts on Sunday mornings. “Unitarian Universalism is a halfway house between religion and the golf course.”

This joke implies that theology and exploration of faith is unimportant and we simply can’t be bothered to claim what it is we believe and who it is we are and what our

tradition means because we are too busy trying to find the best organic, fair trade coffee around. Our faith is a hobby at best and recreational and ineffectual at worse. You may simply do whatever you like, as much as you like or as little because we do not require commitment to something larger than our individual wants and desires and amusements. Is this our religion?

Oh and let's not forget our never-ending discussions! "When a Unitarian Universalist dies she finds herself walking along a road. Eventually she comes to a fork in the road with two signs in the shape of arrows pointing in opposite directions. One of the signs reads, 'This Way to Heaven'" but the UU takes the path the other sign points to which reads, "This Way to a Discussion of Heaven."

We would rather talk about something than experience it! Maybe we would even rather talk about something we don't quite believe in rather than be wrong. If all things important and unknown stay merely as conversation then we are never faced with the reality or the possibility of what is or what may not be. We cannot live fully because we are too busy discussing the idea of living. Is this our religion?

Is Unitarian Universalism a joke? Are our liberal religious tradition, our beliefs and theology something to laugh at? Is our faith a laughing matter? No. As I said before, it is important to be able to laugh at ourselves, to not take ourselves too seriously, but if we don't take ourselves seriously at all, where does that leave us? It leaves us with nothing but an empty, fragile and inconsequential faith that cannot hold us in times of sorrow and pain, nor offer us adequate place for life's celebrations. So we must, even in the midst of humor, be a serious religion for serious people. What is more serious than

our tenets of freedom, of dignity, of love and of oneness? We do believe something! We are committed and we know that truth is there for the finding.

Coffee is not what draws us together on Sunday morning. It is our need to make connections, to be known, to create community. We believe words hold power and importance so must be used with care and thought. We know that when we say something it matters. We are careful to say only what we believe so that we may not contradict ourselves too much. Unitarian Universalists believe that through freedom we will come to true faith, not by the assertions of others, but by our own hard thinking and pondering and yes, even discussing. Because it is by sharing our stories and our ideas that we learn and that we grow. Many of us are committed to this faith, to this tradition, to church. We are well aware that only by our efforts will this congregation be sustained, because it is our church.

“Little does contemporary religion ask of [humanity].” Wrote the Jewish mystic Abraham Joshua Heschel. “It is ready to offer comfort; it has no courage to challenge. It is ready to offer edification; it has no courage to break the idols, to shatter callousness.

The trouble is that religion has become ‘religion’ – institution, dogma, ritual. It is no longer an event. Its acceptance involves neither risk nor strain.”

This is not so for Unitarian Universalists. This is not to say that we are better or more perfect in our piety or faith than other traditions, but we do have an advantage in that we don’t have dogma or creed walling us into static and unchanging belief. We are called to work for our faith, for our religion. It demands our effort and our action.

“Religion,” wrote Rev. Dana Greeley, “is affection and compassion and kindness more than it is buildings and crosses and liturgy. It is understanding and forgiveness more

than it is creeds and catechisms. It is an invincible promise or yearning of the soul. It is trust more than it is magic or manipulation, and it is love more than it is fear. It is in the irrepressible wonder of the human soul. Religion is the inexhaustible fountain of truth and of right. It is the only answer to the alternative emptiness of life.”

Religion is serious and our religion is serious. We believe in the unity of God, the oneness of all creation, nature, life and humanity. We believe that we are each connected to the world and it to us; that how we live makes a difference. “The religion,” as Davies wrote, “that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brother and sisterhood unbounded!”

We are a serious religion for serious people. A religion that demands the use of reason to examine and determine truth “both old and new;” a religion that asks us to “seek what is true and good and beautiful with minds unimpaired and spirits uncrippled.” We are a tradition that declares we are not born of sin, and that the power of divine love, the love of an open and giving heart and God is available to all – a love that is “big enough for worldwide love of all and one another.” We affirm the dignity of all peoples and life. In the face of all the suffering and cruelty of the world we do not despair, but we envision the world a better place, not for the “future, but here and now.”

“Once upon a time, two cars were in an accident on the interstate. Both drivers were seriously injured. The state police arrived and asked the victims if they would like a priest.

The first person said she was Catholic, and yes, she wanted a priest. The police summoned a priest who arrived shortly.

The second person said he was a Unitarian Universalist. One of the officers knew there was a UU church not far away. She called the church, and the minister was on the spot in a few minutes.

The Unitarian Universalist minister rushed to the injured man and, before she could introduce herself, she heard the priest begin to take the Catholic woman's last confession by saying, 'Do you believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost?'

The minister, not wanting to appear less professional than the priest, bent over the injured UU and said, 'Do you believe in open inquiry, social justice, and world community?''

Is this your religion?