

Atheists, Humanists and FreeThinkers in our Unitarian Closets

A Sermon by Terry Anderson

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Introduction

How many of us have ever heard a sermon on atheism, freethinking or humanism at a Unitarian Church? Part of my motivation for this talk, is that since I first joined a Unitarian Church over 45 years ago I cannot recall a single talk or sermon on atheism in all those years - I confess however that I may have dozed through a few sermons! Thus, I thought it is time we looked at our atheist, humanist and Freethinker history within a Unitarian context.

You will hear this morning that there is much more to the family of issues known as Humanism, atheism, skepticism and freethinkers. As Unitarians we have a long and proud tradition of providing a home and the richness of congregational experience and support to thousands of Humanists, Atheists, freethinkers and agnostics. But you'll also hear how even in Unitarian Churches, Freethinkers often had to struggle to maintain and celebrate their own suspicions and disbeliefs, while at the same fully participating in a caring religious community.

I'll be going through a very quick history of the struggles that non-theists have had over the years and the growing sense of our welcoming reception in many Unitarian communities.

I also want to cover some of my personal discoveries as I have been reading and reflecting on my own religious orientation. I end by describing my deepening understanding of the use of the adjective 'religious' to describe an atheist or a humanist – and why it is not an oxymoron after all..

What is a Humanist?

This morning I'm going to focus on the term 'humanism' as it seems to be the most common term in Unitarian circles for atheists and Freethinkers.

Here's a short definition of humanism "a godless philosophy based on reason and compassion." (Continuum of Humanist Education) Or as the American Humanist Association states "Humanism is a progressive life stance that, without supernaturalism,

affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity.” Humanism is but one of the terms given or used by those who reject superstition in their lives. Greg Epstein the author in our January FreeThinker Book Club selection writes that “if you identify as an atheist, agnostic, freethinker, rationalist, skeptic, cynic, secular humanist, naturalist, a deist, as spiritual, apathetic, nonreligious, “nothing” or any other irreligious descriptive, you could probably count yourself as a humanist.” – obvious describing a very large tent.

Two years ago Susan and I attended UU services in the Eastern US – many of whom referred to God and said prayers. This indicates a strong theist tradition defines as “belief in the existence of a god or gods, especially belief in one god as creator of the universe, intervening in it and sustaining a personal relation to his creatures.”(Oxford dictionary” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/theism>

A second family group are those who are of the Humanist orientation as I just described. Coupled with these two - **humanism** and **theism**, is a 3rd vibrant **pan-theism** tradition, perhaps most in evidence in our earth centred celebrations, notably the coming Solstice Celebration at City Hall. These three large families now co-exist in our Unitarian Churches, with certain tensions, but at best with a strong sense of the value, mutual respect and also valued diversity of religious community and practice.

Early Greeks

But lets begin at the beginning as we trace Humanist and godless development and growth. Perhaps the first atheists – or at least the first who wrote about such issues were the ancient Greeks, notably Epicurus who argued that “fear of the gods is the greatest obstacle to human happiness” and Protagoras who argued that “As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or do not exist.”

Given the denial of the divinity of Jesus, it is easy for Unitarians to do a quick forward and think of the founding of Unitarian Churches first in Transylvania in the 1500s and a few hundred years later in England and the US as more recent examples of Humanist thought and practice. But it would be a mistake to equate denying the the Trinity as leading directly to a disbelief in God. Many, in fact almost all, of these early Unitarians were theists. They believed something as complex, and as they were discovering as old as the Earth is a great mystery that was so beyond them, that it must have been caused by a supernatural god. A sort of hybrid ‘ism’ became a popular term amongst early atheists and humanists who got away from persecution by agreeing that the Earth is so unbelievably complex, that it must have been created by a supernatural god. However, these ‘Deists’ argued that either through divine will or inability, god does not interfere in human lives. As we ‘ll see when we look at specific figures the cloak of deism sheltered many a closet atheists from persecution by theist fanatics.

Enlightenment:

We next fast forward to the 18th and 19th century, when the Enlightenment was beginning to inspire individuals to critically examine all of the social and the natural influences in their lives. The Enlightenment followed hundreds of years of medieval life in which religions, heresies, corruption and misrule by divinely appointed kings had led to decades of war and accompanying religious persecution.

The enlightenment enabled and encouraged a rationale assault on superstitions and theists' explanations for disease, calamities and political oppressions. The Enlightenment ideas were celebrated by many Unitarians and the idea that a single man, was chosen by and in fact was God, with a mission to die in order to save humanity from God's wrath, was just too much for the rationale mind. Thus, by the early 19th Century most of the New England Congregational churches switched to Unitarianism. The simple reason for this switch was that they didn't believe that the man Jesus Barr Joseph was a god. But they still believed in a one, single and unitary god - Thus the name Unitarianism.

The Enlightenment was also an assault on the idea that the world was not only god-created, but god-dominated in every aspect of political, economic, civil and family life. Enlightenment thinkers had a tremendous appetite for saying lets finally get over this and create a government in which there are certain inalienable rights- not given by a god, nor giving others the power to obstruct or eliminate the individuals right to liberty and the pursuit of justice. This is, of course, a paraphrase of the words from the US Declaration of Independence coined by Thomas Jefferson.

Like many political and educational movements, the Enlightenment gave rise to tremendous new opportunities and in the American case to a new form of government. But it also gave rise to both excess and a backlash. The excesses were perhaps most realized 20 years after the American Revolution during the French Revolution. In France the ideas first instantiated in the American Revolution were expanded upon and brought to frightening excess that resulted in the execution of thousands of nobles and church leaders and eventually Republican political opponents.

As tragic as the excess of the French Revolution, so also was the counter reaction against Enlightenment ideals. Members of both religious and secular elites suddenly realized that the pursuit of knowledge and freedom could easily result in the curtailment of their own privilege, entitlement and wealth. There grew a profound mistrust of the mob and it became apparent that the fear of the afterlife, inherent respect for authority and so called wisdom of the Faith of our Fathers could be used to both control the lower classes and insure the self preservation of elites. In response to Thomas Jefferson's specific omission of God from the Declaration of Independence and the pre amble to the constitution, a

counter movement arose. The rally call to add “one nation under God” was a constant political focus for religious conservatives of both protestant and catholic tradition.

Thomas Jefferson is a particularly interesting case. One cannot underestimate the esteem in which Jefferson was held by his contemporary citizens. Thus, it was extremely challenging for many to tolerate Jefferson when he wrote in 1785 “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg”. However, despite his atheism and belief in a rational universe, Jefferson was enough of a politician to know that not in the 18th century, nor today, has anyone ever been elected as President of the US or a prime minister of Canada who is an outright ”godless atheist”. This would certainly have been the charge, with great loss of political support, had Jefferson come out of the closet. As an aside, one of the tactics explored by the Clinton campaign in the last US election was to ask in a public forum if Bernie Sandals was an atheist . When really pressed, Jefferson would say that he was Deist. Jefferson further elaborated that as an independent deist, “I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know.”

Despite the high esteem most Americans held for Jefferson, his ideas were never really adequately exposed to the general public. Christopher Hitchens notes that it wasn’t until long after his death that Jefferson’s most “scornful ideas on revelation and redemption” and his edited version of the new testament was published in which he expunged all references to miracles and the supernatural.

Jefferson didn’t think of himself as a Unitarian, but he did demonstrate the challenges of “coming out” as a atheist or even what is now called a Humanist. Perhaps even more tragic is the fate of Thomas Paine, one of the signatures of the American Declaration of Independence who very nearly died in a French prison, attempting to further the cause of rationalism and anti-ecclesiastic thinking. Paine was a major force in the successful War of Independence and he was an “out of the closet” atheist. His considerable efforts resulted in he and Jefferson being able to restrain the theists from encumbering any sense of God in the American constitution and arguing strenuously for the separation of religion and state. Paine was an ally of Jefferson but he was not smart (or political) enough to keep his mouth shut and as result very nearly lost his head during the French revolution.

Unitarian Christianity

The 19th Century also witnessed the efforts by Unitarian theologians to get their heads around theism in a Christian context. William Chaney's 1819 Baltimore Sermon on Unitarian Christianity, (Channing, 1819) articulated what he believed to be defining characteristics of Unitarians. Note that his was a defensive position, trying to show the theistic underpinnings of a denomination that rejected the divinity of Jesus yet was still acceptably theist. He was thus trying to overtly define, and without shame, the differences between Unitarians theists and traditional Christians – but he seemed not the least interested in addressing the Freethinkers or Atheists in the Unitarian closets.

He listed 4 tenants of Unitarian Christianity

1. The Unity of God- after all we are Unitarians, but this is certainly a theist notion
2. Jesus as being fully human – no Freethinker would argue against this obvious truth
3. The purpose of Jesus' mission – Again Most Freethinkers admired Jesus and though they wouldn't have been sure what he meant by the "kingdom of God", they had much to admire in his mission.
4. The moral perfection of God – I won't even attempt to explain what the moral perfection of god is. After a 30 minute consultation on the subject, with Dr. Google, I'm still confused – but as a Humanist, I don't think it is really that important and not a hot topic in Unitarian churches to day.

<http://firstunitarian.org/blog-the-roots-of-unitarianism/>

Chaney's vision of a Christian Unitarianism became 'mainstream' and especially in the Puritan-rooted Unitarians of New England.

Age of the Free Thinkers

Another of the books we will be reading in the FreeThinker book club this winter, is called *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* by Susan Jacoby. This book describes case after case of American citizens who have been forced to hide or misrepresent their anti-theist and non-religious views. However, in 19th century North America one could get away with referring to ones self as a FreeThinker or as mentioned, a Deist, and not be slandered as an “godless atheist”. In the years recovering from the terrible losses during the American Civil War, many theists argued that this is what is to be expected from a republic that didn’t acknowledge God. In 1861, Saimon Chase, Secretary of the US Treasury ordered the Director of the Mint at Philadelphia, to inscribe “In God we Trust” on all US coins, He argued that “*No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in His defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins.* (Department of the Treasury, ND)

<https://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>

Thomas Jefferson was likely rolling in his grave to hear this. But it does give a sense of the extent to which belief in a theistic god was deemed to be absolutely essential to being a good and moral person and for survival as a nation and a culture. As result, the closets filled up with silenced Humanists, Atheists and other Freethinkers.

FreeThinkers and Human Rights

As you might expect, those who strive to live by reason were regularly confronting ideas and behaviours that tended to subjugate certain people and to buttress the oppression of others, often by those creating advantage for themselves. Thus, from the very early days of the anti-slavery movement there were strong supporters and activists both from within religious groups as well as by Freethinkers who rejected theists rational and arguments for the subjugation of others. In some sense the Freethinkers were free’er to be activists because they had no ugly scriptures or godly proclamations to obscure their vision and commitment to equal rights.

Later, in the first sufferage movement in the US, led by Susan B Anthony and Unitarian Elizabeth Stanton a bitter debate raged amongst women (and a few men). This controversy highlighted the injustices emanating from religious bias and oppressive attitudes and practices towards women (as we still see today in many religious cultures). Opposing these anti-religious ideas were suffragists who felt that the real issue was getting the vote and that attacking religion only alienated potential supporters of all genders. This was probably most visibly illustrated when Elizabeth Stanton published her “Women’s Bible” in which she reinterpreted Christian scriptures so as to “exalt and dignify women”. Susan Jacoby in her *Freethinkers’* history of American Secularism speculates that the split between religious suffragettes and the nonreligious “may have

delayed the attainment of women's suffrage by a full generation". Thus many of these strong women were tactically forced to hide their true misgivings about religion in the closet of almost all churches – including Unitarian Churches.

Unitarian Humanism

In the early decades of the 20th century witnessed moves by humanists thinkers and Unitarian ministers to try to move the denomination towards non-theist views. Coincidentally, the Free Thinker Friendly Program that you see acknowledged on the wall, was instigated partially to mark the 100th anniversary of Religious Humanism in Unitarian churches. This beginning is marked by John Dietrich's descriptions of 'religious humanism' in 1917.

Among excerpts from Dietrich's many sermons and talks at Unitarian Churches conventions was the contention that "man is the highest product of the creative process, with nothing above or beyond him but his own ideals as an end in himself and not the purposes of a superior being"(apologies for the gendered pronoun he used). He also argued for a humanist social justice mission noting that the most important function of faith was in improving human life. The 1921 National Convention of Unitarians saw keynote speakers on both sides of the theist/humanism debate. Theist Unitarians pointed out that the majority of Unitarians accepted Jesus teachings and see themselves as children of a superior god, therefore we would be foolish to preach ideas that alienate these majority ideas. However, the convention was assuaged by Unitarian minister Curtis Reese who argued that "theism is philosophically possible, but not religiously necessary". (cited in Murry 2006, p. 42). After the failure of the theists at that and subsequent conventions, it is quite possible that in some churches – notably Reese's and Dietrich's, we may well have seen theists hiding in the Unitarian closets! It is a strange fact of human behavior, that talk about God's existence or nonexistence, seems to cause a great deal of angst and anger.

My Dewey connection

I turn now to one of the most important contributions to American philosophy and education and as I have learned recently to Religious Humanism. First though a personal diversion. As many of you know, I am a retired Education professor and as expected, I learned to “publish or perish”. I have authored or co-authored 10 books and well over a hundred peer reviewed articles and book chapters. If one were to count the authors cited in my work, I am quite certain that John Dewey would be at or very near the top of the list. Thus, during my research for this talk, I was quite surprised to read that Dewey had written about Religious Humanism. I had never bumped into these works before – another advantage of doing a Sunday morning talk!

In 1933 Dewey was invited to give a series of Lectures in Philadelphia. This lecture series was (and still is) funded by the estate of Connecticut businessman Dwight Terry. This annual lecture is known as the “Terry Lecture”- thus Dewey’s words literally had my name written all over them!

Dewey argued that “what is genuinely religious will undergo an emancipation when it is relieved from them (the supernatural); that then, for the first time, **the religious aspect of experience** will be free to develop freely on its own account.” Dewey, J. (1934). From A common faith. *The essential Dewey* (1998), 1, 401-410.

Dewey noted that there is a difference between ‘religious’ used as an adjective to qualify an attitude of reverence, gratitude and awe, and ‘religion’ as a noun- the institutions organized to control and propagate supernatural ideas. He felt that those who denied or felt there was insufficient evidence to support the idea of an interfering or a theist God, should not be denied a religious experience. And that that religious experience can grow and be nourished through understanding of our relationship in nature and “the possibility of developing a faith in the possibilities of human experience and human relationships that will create a vital sense of the solidarity of human interests and inspire action to make that sense a reality”. (Dewey, 1930 in Shook J.R. (2014) Democracy, Religion, and Ethical Progress. In: Dewey’s Social Philosophy. Palgrave Macmillan, New York). He goes on to say “I believe that many persons are so repelled from what exists as a religion by its intellectual and moral implications, that they are not even aware of attitudes in themselves that if they came to fruition would be genuinely religious.” John Dewey, in Hickman and Alexander (eds), p. 404 1998). Dewey sought to rescue and restore the religious impulse, to keep religious language, music and ritual, *even if people no longer believed in a theist God*.

I have long had trouble with the word religion –especially if used as a noun. However, Dewey argued that the word can be used as an adjective to describe feelings, attitudes and affect that do not necessarily have anything to do with religions –used as a noun. I

remember the discussions surrounding the adoption of our mission statement years ago, and feeling generally un-easy when we choose to describe ourselves as “A compassionate community of free religious thought’ – and I wasn’t bothered by the compassion! Now, however, when I think of religious, as used here as an adjective, I can get 100% behind our mission statement!!

Humanist Manifestos

Now we move to the era when Humanism started to become mainstream or at least known and recognized by many. The First Humanism Manifesto in 1933 had 34 signatories including 11 Unitarian Ministers and John Dewey. The Manifesto sets out 15 propositions that Humanists ascribe to. Many will sound familiar to and have common roots with the seven principles you find around these walls today. A few examples are:

Abhorrence of supernatural activities: Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.

Joy of Life: Believing that religion must work increasingly for joy in living, religious humanists aim to foster the creative in man and to encourage achievements that add to the satisfactions of life.

Social Justice: We assert that humanism will: (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them; and (c) endeavour to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few.

A Second Humanist Manifesto (1973) increased focus on social issues and a Third Humanist Manifestos (2003) from the American Humanist Association was much shorter with an increased focus on the social components of humanism.

So, this brings us up to modern day Humanism

The Unitarian Universalist Religious Naturalists

As noted, nearly two years ago, we discovered the UU Religious Humanist Association and their FreeThinker Friendly program. In preparation of this talk I also discovered Murry's 2007 book *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century* challenges. This book questions the capability of finding 'the spirit' in nature alone. Murry argues that "naturalism is not a sufficient source of religious meaning because nature is morally neutral or simply amoral". He postulates that we don't find in nature alone the energy for kindness, compassion, love or hope. This cry for a Humanism that goes beyond humans to the whole of nature found sympathetic ears in some Unitarian congregations.

In 2004 Unitarian Religious Naturalism was organized. It is described by Demian Wheeler as a Religious, Natural theology for UU Humanists. (<http://firstunitarian.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Religious-Naturalism-D-Wheeler.pdf>). Wheeler describes Religious Naturalism as "a perspective that regards nature as both exhaustive of reality and worthy of deep reverence and devotion." Thus, this outlook denies supernatural operations, but still holds steadfastly to the need for awe and reverence when thinking about and living with nature. This is probably best reflected by Carl Sagan's reflection that "When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual" (Sagan 1996: 29).

The UU Religious Naturalists supposedly meets annually at the UUA's general Assembly - but unfortunately their web site is unimpressive. I applied to be able to see the discussion posts (closed to the general public) and even paid \$15 US to join, but alas I've heard nothing from them. However the idea of enriching Unitarianism with deep naturalist thinking will likely appeal to many existing and potential Unitarians.

Today's Issues for the UU Humanists and Atheists

I'd next like to highlight current issues that Humanists, Atheists and Freethinkers – both within and outside of Unitarian congregations, are engaged with today.

1. **Separate School Issue.** Humanists, educators and taxpayers are now uniting to end the unfair and unequal state sponsorship of Catholic Schools. As one would expect this is a very hot political issue that traditional parties have avoided so as not to antagonize those who have become used to their religious entitlement. Alberta remains one of only 3 provinces in Canada with full Catholic School funding. This results in inefficiencies and reduction of educational opportunities for both Catholic and non-Catholic and reduces inter denominational interactions amongst kids and parents. The right to Catholic education is NOT forever enshrined in the Canadian constitution or the Bill of Rights, as some claim, but rather the current state is a result of the passage of a bill in 1901 by the Canadian government- an act that could easily be amended.

<http://www.publications.gov.sk.ca/freelaw/documents/english/statutes/historical/ONWT-1901-CH-29.pdf>

2. **Opening Prayers and Government events**

Another contentious issue is the practice of opening government meetings with prayer – even aboriginal prayers. Very few things excite and inflame passion as much as religion. Thus Humanists and Atheists have long sought to remove prayer from government ceremonies. A 2015 ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada states that “the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs. The state must instead remain neutral in this regard. This neutrality requires that the state neither favor nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non belief.” AS a result of this ruling Edmonton City Council suspend use of prayer to open City Council meetings.

3. **Environment:** Humanists have much to say about the environment. Having a profound realization that there is no promise of everlasting life creates an impulse to live this single gift of life in ways that “use our power to help and not to hinder”. How can we continue to support mega projects like the tar-sands knowing full well that their development only exacerbates Canada's efforts and commitments to reducing carbon emissions. I am tired of ignoring the growing evidence that the world doesn't need, nor it is willing to pay for the high economic and environmental costs of this industry. We humans must take responsibility for all we have done and are doing to harm the environment we can't expect a god to solve these problems for us.

4. **Influence on Public Schools:** As might be expected, Humanists oppose efforts by especially fundamentalist groups to infiltrate public school with so called “moral sex education curriculum”, free bibles, restrictions on activities of LGBTQ students and restricting access to birth control information. Having no guarantee of divine guidance or interference, propels Humanists to make great efforts to insure that future generations are prepared and able to manage the complex world upon which we and all other creatures live.

Angry Atheists

I wanted to say a few words about the persecution of atheists in particular and the one of the reasons that many atheist are still “in the closet” both within and outside of religious organizations. The number of Christian ministers who are atheists is likely much higher than any of us would believe. However, many of those who have lost their theist beliefs are so entrapped in their culture, economic responsibilities and career aspirations that they fear to be outed. One can look at the case of Greta Vosper who still remains on the edge of being defrocked by the United Church of Canada, to understand why many of these ministers remain well hidden in the closet.

It is a shame that most people come to define and understand humanism and atheism not from self-proclaimed atheists but from the outrageous claims of evangelical ministers. For example, Tim Lahaye in 1980 published a hate filled assault on humanism entitled *Battle for the Mind*. He argued that “Humanists work untiringly to keep parents from injecting any moral ideals into their children. Believe it or not, their goal is a worldwide generation of young people with a completely amoral (or animal) mentality.”

In the US – despite the separation of Church and State, during the military drafts of 20th Century Wars – notably Vietnam, one couldn’t be both a conscientious objector and an atheist and thus many were drafted into that immoral war. Wendy Kaminer wrote in *The New Republic* in 1996, “Atheists generate about as much sympathy as pedophiles. But, while pedophilia may at least be characterized as a disease, atheism is a choice, a willful rejection of beliefs to which vast majorities of people cling.”

One of the ways that Atheists are currently put down is to discredit them by referring to them as just ‘angry atheists’ or ‘atheist fundamentalists’. Denouncing someone’s ideas as being angry has long been a denigrating practice of mean spirited people that is familiar to both feminists and the LGBTQ communities. You criticize the rightness of an opponent’s position, by noting the shrillness, or the perceived anger, or your own anger in hearing controversial statements and you denigrate it as fundamentalist, overly strident, preachy or just plain spiteful anger. So sure, some atheists are angry- so are some Unitarians, Christians, ecologists, doctors, farmers and children, but that does not allow us to ignore or make a joke of their righteous anger.

Stages of Religious Development

As any of you who have been involved in writing a scholarly thesis, you will know that you must ‘add the theory’. This is done not only to appease your supervisor but it also adds a coherent theoretical narrative and some generalizability to your argument. So I’ll now turn to the way that scholars and theologians have theorized the development of religious thoughts and sensibilities through the ages – hoping to illustrate how Humanist and especially religious humanism fits in these stages of spiritual development.

Ken Wilbur, Jean Gebser, Robert Keegan and the previously noted John Deitrich have each developed progressive models illustrating the stages of what could be called our consciousness or even spiritual awareness.

It is easy to think of history as beginning 4 or 5 thousand years ago when we first learned to write and record our stories. But of course homo sapiens are much older than that—probably around 300 -350 thousand years. Our first stage of religious development theory likely began with a time of very primitive consciousness where we are beginning to understand ourselves as individuals operating within the complex cycle of natural rhythms. We are living in direct response to nature and considering ourselves to be totally a part of nature. Thus, we lived in a sort of primitive Garden of Eden marked by a self and family -absorbed focus on survival. We next evolve to a state of tribal superstition and magic, where we believe that natural spirits are a component of everything and are directing and influencing our everyday lives. Next, is a stage of mythos where we develop and maintain stories (of both humans and gods) that help us to better understand the way the world functions. These myths provide models for correct behaviours required for harmony within human groups. These myths later become institutionalized and exploited by elites through the creation of formal religions. This is the stage of the great mono-theistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These religions dictate commandments and activities designed to insure our collective survival - but also have come to protect the entitlements of certain classes of people. Eventually these forces yield to a more rational sense of the world –commonly associated with the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. This stage is marked by consciousness that sees us as creatures of a rationale universe, with a growing sense to how to survive in a way that respects the global home on which we live. Finally, most of these authors note a final “integrative state” wherein we retain the wisdom accumulated by all of these previous stages – including a profound respect for rational thinking. Moreover, we also begin to develop a state of consciousness that both recognizes and celebrates the connections between ourselves and our planet. Through actions we develop a moral, compassionate and inclusive mental state that celebrates science, nature, myth and ritual and the potential of human beings to live harmoniously on and with the other creatures of this planet.

I see in my own life a beginning of moral development in my childhood home, that was dominated by external myths and beliefs focussed on an external and constantly interfering and judging god. I discarded these beliefs as a young adult and for many years struggled to just accept myself and others as they were- without preaching or judging. I began to realize that a scientific mindset is necessary for the development of rational thinking and that there really was no rationale basis for theist gods. However, I also came to know that we need further support to arrive at a sense of both personal and social awareness in which compassion and moral thought and action is both celebrated and nourished. John Dietrich also noted a third function of religion – beyond social justice and education. This is to provide a place for worship. From his Humanist perspective worship means “directing ones mind and emotion towards those qualities that enhance human life” (Murry, 2007 p.39).

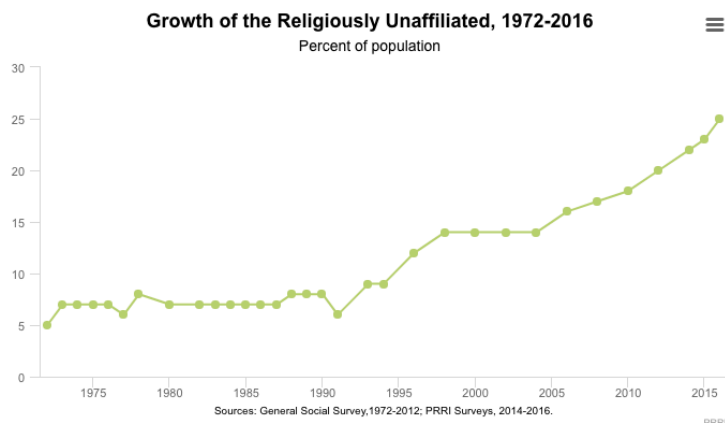
I think that here in our Unitarian Churches we strive to meet these goals throughout the year. We acknowledge the scientific mindset that helps us understand the interdependent web and we do not pay attention to superstitions, gods, and forces of evil that others conjure to regulate their lives. However, and most importantly we struggle to articulate and to practice a life of goodness.

Guidelines for this goodness are engraved in our 7 principles that you see around you. But note that these principles were not given by a god, they are not immutable nor complete. The of 4th principle "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," insures that these principles may well respond to continued free and responsible search for truth. In fact some have criticized the principles for having an individual focus that fails to encapsulate the power of community and the social. However, do remember that during the last four hundred years Unitarian churches used to affirm and support “The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation through Character, and the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever.” (Ross, 2006) <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/how-uu-principles-purposes-were-adopted>). So we’ve come a long ways!

The NONE opportunity

So let me get to a final topic, which addresses the question of why we should care about Freethinkers, Atheists and Humanists in our Unitarian churches today. The so called “Nones” or Nuns are those who, when asked on survey’s and census forms describe themselves as having no religious beliefs. The [2011 Canadian census](#) reported that 23.9% of Canadians declare [no religious](#) affiliation.¹. a survey also in 2011 conducted by [Ipsos-Reid](#) showed that 47% of the Canadian population believed religion does more harm in the world than good. (Wikipedia). There is a real age co-variate associated with the Nones. Over [33% of US millennials](#) claim no religious belief, while GenX non-believers are at 23%, Baby Boomers are 17%, and those born before 1945 are only 11%. (Pew Research, 2014 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>) As I confront my own baby boomer mortality, I can see that the numbers of most of us old timers (the majority of whom are theists) are getting smaller and we are literally dying out.

When asked in a 2016 Public Religion Research Institute survey why they stopped being affiliated with a religion, the answer chosen by 60% of Americans was that they stopped believing in the religion’s teachings. In other words they can’t just can’t believe the superstition and delusional nonsense that spouts from most formal religions. The second most popular reason was that their family was never that religious when they were growing up (32%). Fair enough, and a reason likely to grow as GenX raises their children in non-religious families. Finally, a full 29% of respondents listed their experience of negative religious teachings about or treatment of gay and lesbian people as reasons for their none believing status. <https://www.prii.org/research/prii-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>. To all of these nones, Freethinker Friendly Unitarian Universalism offers an opportunity to experience the religious- without being involved in a religion.



Even atheists and especially the children of ‘nons’ need both opportunity, incentive and capacity to develop a mature spiritual identity. Each person comes with a set of identifiers – notably sex, nationality, ethnicity, favorite sports team and more. But there are other identifiers that define a mature person- and these are not endowed by others, but must be earned through study, reflection, exposure and prompt.

Those indoctrinated in religious families usually have their religion defined for them at a very young age. If this identification comes with an absence of personal knowledge and critical reflection it often becomes what psychologists refer to as premature “identity foreclosure”. Those afflicted with this hindrance to their own personal development become especially vulnerable to manipulation by others.

Thus, there is a great need to expand our religious education program and focus on the nones. They need us and we need them!

Conclusion -the part you've all been waiting for!

We've covered a lot of ground- both personal and historical over this talk.

My hope for Westwood is that we build upon our success at becoming the First Canadian Congregation to be certified as FreeThinker Friendly. This gives us opportunity and mandate to draw upon, serve and benefit from the millions of “nons” who are not interested in the theologies of theist religions, but who may find a welcoming and supportive community here at Westwood.

I also hope that you have been intrigued by the ideas of Religious Humanism and of Religious Naturalism and have come to appreciate that being an atheist does not take away the sense of awe, wonder, gratitude and service. In fact just the opposite – rational and empowered atheism, Humanism and Freethinking empowers us to ‘Rest, Grow and Serve the World’ (Westwood Congregation’s motto)

For myself, I remain an atheist but I don't think I'm going to label myself with that term as much any longer . We don't call people who don't believe in Santa Claus as A-Santas. The more I learn about Humanism and most recently ‘religious’ (not a noun) humanism, the more I have begun to appreciate the value of a ‘religious’ (not a noun) experience. These ideas create an opportunity in which our moral sense can be developed and nourished. Further, it is in community that we “use our power” (this month's theme) in a supportive group to act upon our vision for a sustainable future.

So I am an atheist, I am a Humanist, I am a Religious Humanist. I am “Religious Naturalist. I am a FreeThinker and I am also glad to have been able to speak with you today.

Thank you for listening and I hope you will discuss over our lunch your own experience of both theists and atheists hiding in our Unitarian closets in the past and today.

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