

Myths of Free Religion

Hans Kung, the Swiss Roman Catholic theologian, said that: “The Gospels were written for people thinking mythologically at a time of mythological thinking.” Jewish humanist Martin Buber said in explaining Judaism that: “The Jew of antiquity cannot tell a story in any other way than mythically, for to him an event is worth telling only when it has been grasped in its divine significance.” A growing tide in the late 20th century realized that all religions but also all philosophies and ideologies have a tendency to become mythic and are best understood mythically. Joseph Campbell popularized the ideas of Mircea Eliade and C.G. Jung, and taught many of us to take myths seriously and to recognize the mythic dimensions and perspectives of our own beliefs and traditions.

Unitarian Universalists are committed by our fifth tradition to stand against all “idolatry of the mind and spirit.” As Catholic monk Thomas Merton said it: “When a myth becomes a daydream it is judged, found wanting, and must be discarded. To cling to it when it has lost its creative function is to condemn oneself to mental illness. I do not say we must learn to live without myths...but we must at least get along without evasions.” What I consider today are a few of the prevalent evasions or idolatries of free religion.

What does free religion mean? Unitarian Universalists are free from required creeds, dogmas, or sacraments. We are not without shared affirmations. We are not without beliefs, values, and principles. We also have rituals and traditions. In fact, it turns out that we probably have the strongest practical value consensus of any American religion, and we believe passionately that our members should actively practice these shared principles in their daily lives. What you do is more important than what you say. Deeds are more important than creeds. We are secularists with soul, and rational religionists.

One of the prevalent myths about free religion is that we are not really a religion. This is true if a religion is defined as required dogmas and sacraments, or if to be religious requires a fixed view of divinity, being saved, or approved scriptures. But religion does NOT have these set boundaries, as Unitarians and Universalists, among other progressive spiritual types, have been proving for centuries. Unitarian Universalists are free to lift up personal experiences of mystery and wonder as inevitably the basis for any human’s spiritual experiences. We are free to affirm, as we do in our fourth Tradition, that the Judeo-Christian insight that “to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves” is an appropriate foundation for human life. However, that does not limit us in any way from also gaining from the wisdom of all the other world religions, to heed reason and science, and to respond to and support the challenges of “prophetic women and men throughout history that have transformed the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.” We are, as our UUCJ Vision statement says: religiously powerful and spirit-filled, as spirited, as spiritual, as ethically activist, as soulful as any religious expression on Earth.

Each week some one may attend our service who thinks that free religion means that we have no standards, no limits, no prohibitions, and, that they, therefore, have no responsibilities to us, to the world, or even themselves. Because we are untraditional and non-dogmatic, they make the irrational and illogical leap to thinking that we are careless or even nihilistic. In fact, because

we place so much emphasis upon an individual's choices, we are in many ways the most difficult spiritual path because we expect our members to act responsibly practically all of the time. You cannot live a life of violation, waste, and irresponsibility, and then expect for it all to be washed away by a deathbed confession, or to live weeks of greed, selfishness, and righteous bigotry to be converted into heavenly gold because of Sabbath sacraments. This is a shock to some because they have heard we were free, and they thought that meant a license to be illegal, immoral, selfish, greedy, narcissistic, childish, arrogant, or in some other way irresponsible. Instead, we ask them what their standards are for others and the world, and then we challenge one another to live up to these high standards ourselves.

In a world of dogma and angry ideologues, we are philosophical pluralists. For most of the big questions, there is more than one right answer and maybe no final authoritative answer for anyone. In a world of false absolutes, righteous bigotries, and on/off consciences, we believe in realities of probabilities. We use the best discovered standards of reason, science, conscience and experience, and we are wise enough to know that there are few sure things. In a world where most people sincerely seem to believe that most of humanity is hell-bent, and that whole groups of people can be discarded like trash, we are intentionally inclusive, conscientiously accepting, and enthusiastic about being evolving people in an evolving world. There are places for bigots, sexists, and homophobes, but it is not this congregation. You are not free to hate here. It is not ok to be ignorant. You can be different here, and you can change here, but you need to live responsibly with yourself, with us, with the world and for the future. "Love is the doctrine of this church. The quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer," and responsibility is its watchword.

We welcome visitors, but we do expect the people who attend here regularly and benefit from our community to join. Membership is indicated by signing the membership book, but we make clear that we expect the people who join to attend as regularly as they can, to give significantly of their time and talents in service to the congregation, and to generously support the congregation with their money. According to peoples' self-assessments our little chapel should be full every Sunday. Most that join here make some significant friends for life here, some meet a spouse or lover here. Many find their lives changed by sermons, adult education, or other programs or groups at UUCJ. Their children grow up here, and find themselves and shape their values and practices for life here. Many of us take strides toward leadership or discover contacts and steps forward in our vocations. Most who stay for more than a year or two find their relationship with this community as important as any other community in their lives besides their family and their chosen vocation. So, what we receive is very often literally priceless.

The tough reality for us is that in a consumer-spectator culture, people are tempted to take advantage of the fact that we are literally free. They can walk in here, and not give us anything. They come only when it is convenient or the topic sounds interesting. They do not have to put a blessed cent in the offering, and they can sneak into the potluck without a dish and never get around to doing their turn at anything. And our code is that we will smile and say 'good morning' and welcome them again the following Sunday or the following year. It is a free and open system, and it depends upon the content of peoples' characters. It rests upon a faith that they will be responsible for what nurtures them and care for us as we are caring for them. Some cherish the myth that they are not joiners, or pretend because they don't entirely agree with everything and are therefore freed from all obligations. Many explain their unwillingness to give generously to us that

they support so many other good causes or have such overpowering obligations. However, almost everyone here arrives in a shiny vehicle of their own, owns a cell phone, has cable, takes a vacation, goes out to eat, and otherwise reinforces the fact that on average Unitarian Universalists are at the top of the American denominational per capita income pyramid, while their donations to charity, particularly their congregation, are on average mediocre.

Now, most of you are at least partial exceptions to most of these forms of irresponsibility. I am grateful for everything that everyone does. I recognize that it is entirely voluntary, that you are doing what you are doing out of character, not out of guilt, out of enthusiasm, not out of fear, out of your generous hearts, not on the basis of dogmatic requirements. So are Kathleen and me. We volunteer significantly in this community and in the larger community. We are giving over 10% of our income to charity, and plan to pledge about 6% of our income to this congregation for the coming year because it represents our values and philosophy of life. It is the community that best reflects our faiths. We challenge you to do the same. I suspect that there are several dozen of you who make more money and/or have more wealth than we do. I challenge you to meet or exceed what we are giving to this congregation. Give not only when you are in charge, but when you are simply a member again. Remember then what you felt about people who needed to be in charge in order to be generous. When we were very young, perhaps, we did not have money to give, and we gave time or talent because we had those in abundance. So, now, you are short of time, but you have money; so, now it is your turn to be the one who gives more money. Yes, at any particular moment, there are those among who are bereft of resources. Just enjoy our company, and when you are flush again, with talent, time or money, then give generously again. Let none of us make the mistake of thinking that freedom means irresponsibility, or that believing in free religion some way gets you off the hook from being a grown up. Communities do not happen miraculously. They are created, nurtured, maintained, and evolved through persistent generosity with money, time, and talent. We need a generous dose of each of these from almost all of you. There is no question that, right now, we are capable as a congregation, of raising all the money we need with our pledges. The question is not whether we can do it. The question is simply will we do it?

I am glad that it is Darwin Bromley, our President Elect our Canvass Chair's intention to have a person-to-person canvass of each member. This process lives up to our principle of congregational democracy, but democracy takes a bunch of active congregational citizens. Kathleen is going to be a canvasser. I hope you will be too. I look forward to our raising enough money to pay the congregational budget we need to do the programs you want, and to repair, renew, and enhance these beautiful historic facilities. I look forward to the day soon when we can turn more of our congregational energies to the needy world beyond these facilities, both in our programs and in our financial expressions, but we cannot do so if we have not been responsible for ourselves as a religious community. Thank you in advance for truly becoming as generous in deed as you are capable of being.