

The Alternative to Religion?

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The Rev. Dr. Harold (Hal) Porter

Good Morning! I am pleased to be here. When David McIntire called with his invitation, I readily accepted and I will explain why in the course of my remarks. But let me begin with a letter to the editor last month to a newspaper I subscribe, *The Progressive Populist*. It reads:

“When I was a child, I attended Sunday School every week in a little Presbyterian church where I learned “God is love” and the Golden Rule “do unto others as you would have them done unto you.” When I was in high school, I joined a Congregationalist church youth group and sang in the choir. I suppose those facts make me a Christian; but...I hesitated to admit it.

After all, Christians brought us the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem witch trials. Today they are rabidly anti-Muslim and also fundamentalist Bible-thumpers who want to keep women at home, preferably pregnant. This is so far from what I learned in Sunday School that now I call myself Unitarian.” Signed, Gayle Voeller

Well, what Gayle has done many have done. Having become disillusioned with the narrow mindedness of many religious groups that seem more intolerant than embracing, who have done more harm than good, who claim to be the true faith and all others fall short, who insist the Bible is without error and science cannot displace or alter its truth, who worry more about heaven than caring for the earth, who speak of love but deny or subordinate the worth of certain races, sexes, or nationalities.

All this has led a great many to openly declare they are no longer religious or a part of a community of faith. Others have simply moved on from such conservative religious bodies to more progressive inclusive churches; to congregations of faith that are more accepting of diversity; to religious communities that welcome you no matter your particular faith or no faith; to spiritual communities where you may openly share your own convictions without fear of being ostracized.

Yes, welcome to Harbor's congregation! As you declare on your web page:

"We are a warm, friendly congregation of Unitarian Universalists where religious differences are not just tolerated, they're celebrated! Whether you're Christian or Buddhist, Atheist or Pagan, or, wherever you are in your spiritual "Journey," you are welcome here. Come experience for yourself the sacred beauty and the immense power of simply loving and respecting all our neighbors as we do ourselves." Maybe Gayle Voeller found her way here?

One of the reasons I was appreciative of your invitation is I have the highest respect for your religious denomination as a whole. You have a long history in this country holding to love, justice and peace. Your social justice involvements have made our country more a caring place for all peoples. Actually, I have always claimed to be a Unitarian and like your ancestors I thought the doctrine of the trinity more a confusion than a help. In Cincinnati which we left a few years ago there are four U U congregations. I regularly met with their four ministers and we worked on several social justice causes together.

So, I have been like a fox in sheep's clothing in the Presbyterian Church. As to my theological beliefs my denomination did not challenge me. Heresy trials are largely of the past but about other matters I will speak about, they did challenge.

But certainly, your presence here in Western Michigan is an important religious alternative, to be a place where people with good hearts like Gayle can find a more inclusive and diverse community of faith to grow by and worship in. Even though you have no set religious creed, guided only by your denominations Seven Principles, what I find compelling about you is that you are not anti religious but religiously inclusive. I am sure you have found great joy and meaning together as a congregation, not demanding everyone to think alike only to love alike.

Still, no matter how meaningful our own religious experience is, we are certainly aware that churches and religion itself are being highly questioned today as to their worth and their harm, more boldly and loudly than I have ever witnessed.

There are the so-called new atheists and their anti-religion, anti-God books are among today's best sellers. Even though they seem to cherry pick the most bizarre religious views to deflate, they give much support to the increasing number of persons who, when asked their religious affiliation, say none.

And once again since September 11th we have seen firsthand the dark side of religion. And we are still wondering if a great cultural world war with religious underpinnings is yet on the horizon. As Niebuhr said, "The worst corruption is a corrupt religion", and bloody examples abound, and Isis stands out.

And there is the Freedom From Religion Foundation which boasts to be the largest free thought association in North American. It claims its growing membership is composed of atheists, agnostics and skeptics and their first stated goal is to rid our culture of God and religion in general. You may have seen their giant billboard ads. "Yes, Virginia there is no God." Or this, "Keep religion out of politics." Or this "Sleep In On Sundays." (Obviously you have failed at that.) Etc.

And their primary goal is just that, to get rid of religious attitudes in general and create an even thicker wall of separation between church and state, all to silence religious values having a voice and a vote over the destiny of our country. It is rather strange, though, that they are uncomfortable with our glorious First Amendment to the Constitution which guarantees the free exercise of religion. After all it also guarantees the same free exercise of thought and behavior not simply to the religious but to atheists, and those of no faith, and yes, even to The Freedom From Religion Foundation. They, too, are tax exempt! As is the National Rifle Association, who has surely made an idol out of the Second Amendment.

Well you may sense I am not keen on the fundamentalist attitudes of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and their goals to rid society of religion and their efforts to be the care taker of the First Amendment. No, I look to the American Civil Liberties Union to do that better than anyone else...even though I am still taken up with what Jesus said politically, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (I always thought it an honor that the ACLU's office was in the basement of my church in Cincinnati.)

But let me add more to the shaky foundations of faith today.

I recently finished the excellent book, *The Righteous Mind, Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, by Jonathan Haidt. Haidt is an evolutionary psychologist studying the roots of morality. The book is an attempt to understand why we are such a polarized country today, and how we might try to just get along. And it's worth the read no matter your politics or your religion, which Haidt suggests, are mostly the same thing. And I believe that is true for in both politics and religion there are the conservatives, the liberals, and the utilitarian's and they tend to think alike whether they be in church or in congress.

But what the book helpfully demonstrates, and in some detail, is how it is that we use reason mostly to justify our selves, more than to seek truth. As individuals, Haidt writes, “we lie, cheat, and justify so well that we honestly believe we are honest.” On the other hand he contends, what has saved us from our over self-regarding lives is that we humans are also are highly groupish. Humans are remarkable in that we can come together in groups beyond the family, beyond kinship.

And it is in these groups that it is sometimes possible to become a good team player, to be a part of something larger than yourself, to transcend self-interest, and lose yourself for the good of the whole, to become one for all and all for one! These moments produce some of life’s most meaningful experiences while contributing to the common good of society. Indeed, as biologist David Wilson has demonstrated that’s why religions have always existed, for people “to achieve together what they cannot achieve on their own.”

So, to these both plus and minus thoughts, let me add some clearly positive findings from the largest and most respected study of religion America. You can read all about it in the book, *American Grace, How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, by Putnam and Campbell.

There are many issues covered but let me pull out its one major finding, although I am almost reluctant to highlight it. Still, here is the researcher’s summary: “By many different measures religiously observant Americans are better neighbors and better citizens than secular Americans – they are more generous with their time and money, especially in helping the needy, and they are more active in community life.”

Having pastored five different churches, I wasn't surprised by that. Going to church, or a community of faith, is a helpful and healthy thing.

But the danger here is to revel in self-congratulations, adding to what already religious bodies have often too much of – self righteousness, and not accepting the merit and the additional truths of other religious bodies. World peace is not even possible unless we religious all come down a notch from our too often holier than thou attitude. And that's true of nations.

Remember, as individuals, we all are already too self-regarding. That's why Jesus said, "Why, do you see the speck that is in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" We don't even have to believe in God to know we all have a propensity to mess things up, yes, to sin, and we do.

That religious people appear better neighbors and citizens has, however, a surprising answer. It is not because of their doctrine, or that they have the truth, or that they have the right religion. It is because of the religious belongingness that matters, and how enmeshed people are in their relationships with the other members of their faith. It's all these friendships, at worship and study, at their group do-good activities and community welfare efforts, and yes, even in their countless potluck celebrations – all working together within a moral foundation that emphasizes selflessness and altruism and being a part of something larger than oneself that makes for good neighbors.

Religion, which literally means to bind, enables individuals to move beyond their own self-regarding lives to be a part of the whole, gaining a sense of acceptance and belonging. They are inspired to contribute more for the common good, to go the second mile in responsibility. And they become uplifted and they are want to sing, 'Blest be the tie that binds" or some other chorus, becoming a community wherein "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

Which leads me to what I really want to affirm to you. It's all right to be religious! It's not an embarrassment – only if our religious practice proves demonic, or is held at the expense of others, or of the good earth itself.

Religion that is held at the expense of others is as wrong as Abraham was when he thought to slay Isaac to prove his own righteousness. Yes, such self-righteousness leads to the demeaning, even the killing, of others.

What is the alternative to religion? It can only be a better religion that is both loving and just.

Paul Tillich, who trusts God to be “the ground of all being,” said it better than anyone. “You cannot reject religion with ultimate seriousness because the state of being ultimately serious is itself religious.”

Or as Alfred North Whitehead, one of the wisest mind of a generation ago, described it, “Your character is developed according to your faith. This is the primary religious truth from which no one can escape.”

Or as David Rankin, a former minister of Fountain Street Church, in Grand Rapids, the church we mostly attend, put it: “You are religious because you are a conscious and reflective human being. You are religious because you are required, even forced, by your very nature, to frame a response to the ultimate questions of life.”

Or as Fred Wooden, the present gifted pastor of that church has said: “We humans believe. That will never change. What can change is how we believe and what. The challenge is to find an honest way to free our minds, grow our souls, and change the world.”

And I would add, inspite of the ill use of religion to promote hate, every effort towards equality and justice in our country and the world at large, every effort to establish compassionate aid and comfort for the poor, the marginalized, the ill, and the dispossessed, has had strong and courageous religious leadership. I have seen it and hope only for its increase.

Prior to our invasion of Iraq, every major religious groups, including the Roman Catholics, warned against doing so except the Southern Baptists. My own Presbyterian denomination declared that war “to be unwise, immoral and illegal.” And it was. And it was right to speak out. Unfortunately, the government was not persuaded.

Church institutions, like governments, indeed can be slow to change, to adapt, but in the long run congregations are more prone to go the second mild in care for others than not. Their faith is in the long haul.

Still, when the religious gather for worship, it would be more helpful to focus on this world and not another; on the nature all around us, and in us, and not on a super natural world outside of reality. “God is in the world or nowhere,” writes Whitehead, “creating continually in us and around us. Insofar as persons partake of this creative process do they participate in the divine, of God, and that participation is their immortality.” “Religion,” he adds, “is world loyalty.”

Yes, the alternative to religion is a better religion, one that is more inclusive and embracing and that, I believe, is what you seek to be here at Harbor. So I hope you will continue to be a place where faith is exposed to reason, and reason is enlarged by faith. Reminding all that if you want to have an open mind, open your heart first.

And your open heart leads me to share why I also was pleased to be asked to come today. It had to do when last year there was that 10 hour period that gays were granted marriage licenses in Michigan before our attorney general got a legal stay. Somehow you and your then pastor, Bill Freeman, knowing a stay would soon be granted arranged with Muskegon’s clerk, Nancy Waters, (who should be the clerk being acclaimed today instead of one in Kentucky) to married all gays and lesbians that wished. And that turned out to be 48 couples, all persons long denied as their equal worth in our society, all coming here to this church on the same day to be married and to revel in your hospitality!

That was an extraordinary effort on your behalf – a divine – human thing to do. Of course Unitarians have long been about affirming the equal rights for gay and lesbian persons for at least forty years so your were prepared to act – but how you acted was incredible!

It was little more difficult in my own congregation. In the Presbyterian Church we must look back 36 years to 1978, when our national body, reflecting the homophobic culture of the world, declared that “homosexuality was not from God

and its practice was sinful. All such behavior, they declared, is incompatible with Christian faith and life.”

It was indeed an unjust, non-Christ-like policy. By it, in all our 11,000 churches, gays were made to be second class members. They could not be ordained as elders or ministers, and their innate God given sexuality was simply condemned.

When that ruling came down most church members, and society at large, were largely ignorant about homosexuality...it was hardly talked about...and most gays had hidden their identity out of fear. But our local church in Cincinnati, and I its pastor, studied the issue and we came to realize we could not abide by such policy.

So in 1991, 24 years ago, we decided we would establish our own policy and we did. It declared that homosexuality was not a sin and that “gays and lesbians are part of God’s good creation and they, no less than heterosexuals, are meant to enjoy God’s gifts of love, joy, and intimacy.” They were to have full membership in our church and need not deny or hide their sexual orientation among us.

We simply saw this as a justice issue. That we knew of no gays in our own congregation made no difference. We also knew that we needed to oppose our own city’s government because Cincinnati had recently passed a citywide referendum which legalized discrimination by writing into the City Charter that gays and lesbians are “to have no protective status in Cincinnati.”

But when we made our policy clear to our national church, and our city government, that we would not abide by their policies and would seek to undo them, a totally surprising thing happened, we soon doubled our membership.

Within a few years, one-third of our 350 members were openly gay, two-thirds openly straight. Our cup overflowed – blessings abounded! Certainly, there was no other Presbyterian church like it which the newspaper headlines, with alarm, made clear.

Now I believe in institutions and none of us in that church wanted to leave the Presbyterian denomination, but there was no going back. And yes, we knew we would be rebuked and we were. Over the next decade there were several trials

which sought to remove myself, our church officers, and even to remove the whole congregation. But it didn't happen!

Why? Because when ever our higher church authorities came to exercise judgment, thinking there had to be some division in the congregation, what the surprisingly discovered was a vital church totally unified. They were taken back discovering that love overflowed all over the place between gays and straights.

We called it our own Gay 90's era for clearly we all had found a joy and a depth of the Gospel deeper than we had ever known. Well, such prejudice is not over yet, and we have much yet to do here in Michigan to include gays in our states human rights ordinance, but that long arc is bending toward justice and last year, when our national denomination met in Detroit, all was changed and no longer will homosexual persons be treated differently than any other person in the Presbyterian Church – including marriage.

So you can see why I so resonated with your good witness at Harbor.

Let me take a breath and introduce a story here so I can get to the end of my remarks.

A couple in North Carolina were having trouble with one of their two sons ages 8 and 6. The eight year old was just plain difficult very unlike the 6 year old. He just seemed to contravene everything they asked him to do.

Well, they didn't know what to do. They finally took him to a counselor, but after several sessions, his behavior did not change - worse than ever. So they all entered family counseling and still that proved ineffective.

On arriving early for church one Sunday morning they told the minister of their problems. The minister said, "Well, his problem is obvious. His trouble is that he doesn't know God. Leave him with me after the service."

So they did and left him all alone in the huge empty sanctuary. In a little while the minister appeared and shouted, "Where's God? Where's God?" He disappeared for a while and then returned again, and shouted again, "Where's God? Where's God?"

Later, when the eight-year-old came home it was clear by his subdued behavior that something had changed but he remained silent. Later when the two boys went to bed, his younger brother whispered to him. "What happened? What did they do to you?"

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know. I don't know. Somehow God is missing and they believe I had something to do with it."

I don't remember how the speaker was using this story, probably about the misuse of coercive power and how some preachers manipulate others through fear and hell-fire damnation. But I do know that many concepts of god need to be missing in this world.

No one is an expert on God and I certainly am not. And I do know that all our language about God is metaphorical. You in your tradition describe God, or that which ultimate, in many ways such as the Life Force, Ground of All Being, Creativity, The Eternal, Spirit of Truth, or even as the scripture does, that God is love. But I do believe we should leave off with a god who is male, or is only heterosexual, or has a favorite nationality, or skin color.

And let us leave off believing that God belongs only to our own particular faith, but is the Many Named One in whom we all live, and move, have our being, assuring us that all have an indelible place in the great web of life.

And let us be rid of a god who is nothing but a moral dictator, or a wrathful unbending judge, or an absentee landlord, and instead embrace God as our "Great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands" as Whitehead knew – who's power comes through the "tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love."

Yes, it is all about character, God's character and our own, and above all trusting that the character of God is after all Unbounded Love. "The love which is partial in us is all-embracing in God," adds Whitehead.

To know and to serve God as Unbounded Love, means, no one then is excluded. All are called, all are chosen.

And as process theology which is my own view makes clear, since we are all in God and God is in all of us, the purpose of our own lives is also clear. We are to make that nature of God that is in each one of us, real in this world – actual – incarnate, through our own living. How does one do that?

Well, everyone is free and will do it differently, but look at how clearly Jesus did it. He did it so well that the multitudes deified him. He never claimed divinity – he was fully human – truly one of us – but the divine nature of God in our actual historical world took a giant leap forward with Jesus' compassionate deeds, and the wisdom of his life...and so strikingly so, that for many, the seamless robe of history seems to have divided into a Before and After his life.

But so too was the creative advance of God's love more real and richer on the face of this earth after Buddha, Mohamed, Mother Theresa, Gandhi, M. L. King, Mandela, Dorothy Day, and a host of others who actually made God more real on our streets and in our homes, including my own Mother and Father.

I suspect it will be so after Pope Francis, with his humble heart. You have to love this Pope whose Christ like behavior has touched us all – even if you can't accept that priests should only be men or that birth control is an abomination. After all, we love Jefferson. He is a liberal icon, claimed by Unitarians, honored by us all, and yet he held slaves and used them.

And hopefully you are well aware of the contributions of Sister Simone Campbell and the Nuns on the Bus, who with their effort of fairness, continue to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, who threw back into the face of Paul Ryan his unequal budget for America as being nothing less than immoral.

And there's Bishop Tutu, a kind of Christian smiling Buddha, who enabled the reconciliation of the oppressed and the oppressors in South Africa, and revealed so clearly the hopelessness and stupidity of anyone who lives by revenge.

These, along with so many others. So, too, you witness here at Harbor. All Incarnations of God, making God real in the secular world by sacred acts such as, loving the unlovable, caring for the afflicted, overcoming evil with good.

And if you need spiritual encouragement in making God real, think of the little girl who was working on her art assignment when the teacher came by and asked what she was making. She replied I am drawing a picture of God. The teacher smiled and said, "Well Mary, you know no one knows what God looks like." Continuing, without even looking up, Mary replied, "They will in a minute!"

May we, each and every one of us, add to that picture.

Amen.

hgporter@hotmail.com