

THE GODLESS CHURCH OF LIBERALISM?
Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church
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Before I begin my comments, I want to explain the title of this sermon. It is a paraphrase of a recently published book “Godless: The Church of Liberalism” by conservative writer Ann Coulter. For those of you who might not know about her books and writing style, here are the titles of some of her earlier books: “How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must),” “Treason,” “Slander,” and “High Crimes and Misdemeanors.” The last three seem reasonable but they all point to liberal treason, liberal slander, and especially liberal high crimes and misdemeanors. She is not known as a fair and balanced writer.

Nonetheless I decided that the title would make good subject material for this service but that meant I’d have to purchase the book to read it. This presented a problem. I could go to the local bookstores and purchase it but I might get one of those ‘special’ looks at the checkout counter. Debra suggested I purchase it through Amazon.com. I thought that would be a good idea but then realized they’d send me helpful emails saying “**we noticed you purchased this book – we thought you might like these...**” The idea of being put on such a book list seemed too much.

So I did what people probably did years ago when purchasing objectionable materials. I brought some other books – science fiction mostly – along with Michael Lerner’s book “The Left Hand of God” and included Coulter’s book among them. That worked and I sat down to digest her book. It frankly gave me serious intestinal problems. Few sentences made much sense though she has an excellent grasp of language and legal terms. As an example, one paragraph at random in this book says, “**The people (liberals) who call Republicans ‘evil’ subscribe to a political platform that essentially consists of breaking the Ten Commandments one by one. They are for adultery, lying about adultery, covertness, killing the unborn, and stealing from the middle class and giving to teachers and trial lawyers. They create new myths and a new priesthood all to justify a worldview that is the rejection of the Judeo-Christian vision of man’s role in the universe...and they are full of towering, smug, intolerant, self-righteous rage.**”

I carefully read her book twice trying to understand her argument. My best guess is that she says liberals do not believe in the conservative Judeo-Christian belief opting out for an immoral social and biological Darwinism that has become a liberal religion without a God.

Let me say here that I have no intention of ranting about Coulter's book or her view of the world. It can stand or fall on its own merits. And frankly I don't enjoy mudslinging in any form. However, her book raises a good question I want to ask us this morning. **Does religious liberalism in the United States ignore the God question and assume it's not important or does Ann Coulter ignore a liberal paradigm about religious values?**

In the book I also bought that day, "The Left Hand of God," Rabbi Michael Lerner said that the past two thousand years of Christianity have seen a dynamic tension between God-as-fear and God-as-hope. Put a more secular way, he says that the western world and America in particular have tended to move between poles of anxiety and hopefulness when it comes to social, political and religious change. He says that the McCarthy Era, the Cold War, 'the war on drugs' and the current "war on terror" are all examples of fear put into play. The religion of fear (the world is coming to an end, the unbelievers are going to hell, and you might be one of them) is then coupled with the politics of fear (the world is coming to an end if we aren't fully secure and the evil ones are coming).

Lerner goes on to suggest that those who use religion and politics as instruments of fear then suggest that an authoritarian and strong leader must be in charge. This could be a national government, of course, or it could be a missionary zeal to heal the world of its sins. We might well infer this from the reading. David Brooks quotes the following, **"We Americans are the peculiar chosen people – the Israel of our time...God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our people; and great things we feel in our souls. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance guard, sent on through the wilderness...to break a new path...long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether...the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us."** Those are pretty powerful words and as I read them I imagined Jerry Falwell speaking them.

Falwell didn't speak them, however. Their author was Herman Melville in his novel White-Jacket from 1850. Melville was a member of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City along with his wife Elizabeth. According to his biographers, Melville felt that historical Christianity didn't practice what it preached. He also had a far more negative view of the world than many other Unitarians of his day. One of the biographers writes that, **"Melville had a real problem with the theology of Emerson and the Transcendentalists, which was that he found them too naive, too sunny. He said that he "[did] not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow." Given the experiences he had had during his travels, he could not conceive of a pure, loving power that was in charge of the world..."**

This was a dynamic tension between Unitarians in the 1800's before the Civil War. The transcendentalists led by Emerson and others believed in a world of hope and the potential of all humans to live in peace. Others like Theodore Parker and Melville believed that while humankind was probably not doomed, we were only successful when lines were drawn in the sand to bring justice. Our role as the new chosen people meant that we had a special relationship with God and under God's unyielding demands.

How different is that way of seeing the world from today with writers such as Ann Coulter and Michael Lerner staking out claims for the place of God in American life? We have the ancient dualism of fearfulness on one side demanding that we obey the Old Testament God of anger and fury. That side demands our obedience in higher authority of all types. The other side is the God-as-hope-and-love pole that from time to time comes to us through the deeds and words of prophetic women and men. Jesus, Ghandi, the Buddha, Mother Theresa all in their own ways have spoken out of this hopeful and loving voice.

The debate between the optimistic transcendentalists and the pessimistic realists in 19th century Unitarianism is still here today. Now, however, it is debated across the entire spectrum of American society, religion and political values. It is as near to us as our family and as broad as the newspaper or newscast we watch.

The same debate is also true about the very nature of God. The America of Melville's time had little of the religious diversity of today. The Transcendental movement was about as radical as it got and they were safely among Unitarians. Universalists were heretics as well but they firmly believed in a loving and hopeful God.

American religious life now today includes a whole wide spectrum of belief about God, no God, maybe God, Goddess, and so on. We read about the surveys that say 90% of Americans believe in God and this is used as ammunition by religious traditionalists to say liberals and heretics are that small percent. My suspicion is that the surveys don't ask people how they would define God.

My thesis this morning is that Ann Coulter's assumption that liberalism is a godless church misses the whole point. I suggest the larger question be about choice in belief or faith. Let's suppose for a moment that the rigidly conservative view of God is more the traditional variety presented in Islamic and Judeo-Christian history. This version of God has a personality though some might argue it's a little dysfunctional. Commandments are laid down, the sole son is sacrificed in terrible pain and loss. It's clear who is in charge.

Then there's the other version, or more precisely "versions."

This difference might be expressed by a short story that some of you heard last Sunday here at church. As you know, Barbara Wells ten Hove was here with her husband and did a wonderful service. I was sitting in back with John Amell and Leroy Mietzner and Leroy mentioned a tape he'd found. I told him he ought to go up for joys and sorrows and share it and so he did. His story was that he'd been cleaning out his garage and was taking a load to the dump last week. He noticed a toy box among all the others and decided on the spur of the moment to open it and check it for anything he might want to save. He opened it up and there inside was this original tape for Barbara Well's installation service here at church in 1996. Leroy went on to mention that he'd not realized Barbara was going to be here on Sunday and so he was astonished at the coincidence of finding this tape – which is as far as I know the only remaining tape of her installation service here.

That was an amazing story and I am grateful to Leroy for giving me permission to share it again. Now, I know people who would say that it was God's quiet intervention that told Leroy to check that box and open it up. Others would say that it was simply coincidence and it was Leroy's thoughts and actions that were the cause and result.

A third option would be to be amazed at the mystery of how it could happen at that time, place and occasion. We would enjoy the mystery and wonder of how the interconnected web of all existence expresses itself. And that's it. We wouldn't try to worry about sentience or judging deities ready to control our lives or even guide us. We would be attentive to our own inherent wisdom that arises out of our deepest wells of spirit.

Personally I cannot embrace the idea of a God running the whole cosmic show. I can embrace a faith that is perfectly willing to say, "I don't know" when asks if I believe in a God or not.

Are we the "Godless church of liberalism?" I don't think so. I personally think we are God-filled even more than our sisters and brothers in more traditional churches.

But there's a critical difference between their belief and our faith. We celebrate choice about the nature of God including a willingness to give the ongoing creation the name Mystery and leave it at that.

Our God could be called Goddess or Gaia; it could be the Force or the Tao or Buddha nature. It could be expressed through music or sublime art or the love in a child's eyes.

What does "Godliness" mean to us? I'd like to close with a short time for inner reflection. Is that God still one that no longer makes any sense to us given our knowledge? Is that God an underlying organizing principle to the

universe that counters entropy with the power of love? Is that God simply in the eyes of your child or grandchild?

How do we respond to that quiet inner voice? Which path do we then follow? What box do we open to find a treasure within?

In one of his later novels, Melville writes these words about his hero:

“There are many ways; the right one I must seek for myself . . . I but follow the divine instinct in me . . . I may perish there in truth . . . but it shall be in the path revealed to me in my dream.”

May our paths be wise and revealing.

Peace, amen, shalom, blessed be