

“To Believe or Not to Believe”

Over the years, one thing I've learned about myself is, I don't like buffets. I'd rather not have to deal with all the choices. As a child, I remember my father discouraging our family from ordering *a la carte* whenever we ate in a restaurant. Then when I lived in religious community, I enjoyed the “one meal suits all” policy—except for the time shortly after I entered. That night, I had my first encounter with salmon loaf. The salmon came out of a can and had a crunchy consistency that felt very much like tiny fish bones. The whole experience was an ultimate test of my vocation. If I could stomach salmon, all else was possible.

This past summer, I commiserated with my next door neighbor. She and her partner kept extending their lease. They couldn't decide on whether they wanted to stay in Burlington or move out to the country. She said, “We have commitment phobia.” I could appreciate their dilemma. Choices are not easily made. You have to consider and study all your options. It can be paralyzing. Some people may even hope that circumstances will force them in a particular direction Then they won't feel responsible if they make the wrong choice.

Of course, it's a privilege to be able to choose. Freedom to believe or not believe is protected by our constitution. The U.S. holds a unique position in the world thanks to the 1965 Immigration Act. This act, proposed by J.F.K., had a profound impact on the cultural and religious landscape. It eliminated the national origins quotas that had linked immigration to the national origins of groups already in the U.S. As a consequence, America is today the most religiously diverse country in the world. At present, there are more American Muslims than there are American Episcopalians or Jews. In the past century, the dominant American social issue has been race. Today, the great challenge emerging in our civil life is religious diversity.

This past July, I was invited by UVM to be part of an orientation program sponsored by our State Department. The purpose of the program was to introduce students from the Middle East to American culture. As one of the participating institutions, UVM was assigned seventeen Pakistani students, all of whom were Fulbright scholars—fifteen Muslims, one Assembly of God and one Presbyterian. My assignment was to expose them to the role of religion in our culture. It's not often that I relish an assignment, but thanks to our own diverse society, I felt that I could speak from experience of religious pluralism.

I held the first part of the orientation in our own sanctuary. The banners provided a great visual aid. I invited Bob Senghas, our minister emeritus, to join us. The rakusu that he wore, as well as his stocking feet, provided another visual aid of what it meant to be a religious hybrid and how this society offers people the freedom to be both/and Buddhist, UU, Jewish UU, Agnostic, Protestant, Catholic, Humanist UUs all.

The students peppered both Bob and myself with questions—questions worthy of their intelligence. One bright young woman asked me to clarify what I meant in likening a

sustainable ecosystem to a healthy spiritual environment. I purposely used this analogy because, in their other classes, they had heard a lot about “sustainability” in learning about Vermont and its concern for the environment.

The analogy occurred to me some years ago when I visited a nature preserve. There, I learned that a healthy eco-system depends on multiple life forms, or bio-diversity. I wondered why the same thing couldn't be true in relation to the spiritual environment. Why couldn't a diversity of belief systems, religious diversity, contribute to the health and sustainability of the spiritual environment? I continue to find meaning in this comparison and I appreciated the student's question. It gave me the opportunity to further spell out what I meant.

It was a joy dealing with students full of curiosity about religion. Their own religious education from elementary through college was limited to Islamic studies. Comparative religion was non-existent. The first night that I met the students, one of the women said with enthusiasm, “I can't wait to visit a church. I've never been inside a church.”

After our visit to the UU, we traveled in two large vans to Ohavi Zedek, where Rabbi Joshua Chasan gave the students a warm welcome. After his introduction, he took out the scroll of the Torah, unrolled it, and encouraged the students to get a close look at the Hebrew script and the texture of the scroll.

I had difficulty getting the students back into the vans; we were late for our appointment at St. Michael's and it was starting to rain. They couldn't seem to get enough of their first visit to a synagogue. I asked Efron, a Pakistani graduate student at UVM who was accompanying us, why this was so. He said that the students' only knowledge of Judaism amounted to a line or two about the Holocaust. This seemed particularly sad, given that Muslims and Jews both claim Abraham as their father.

When we finally left the synagogue, it had begun to rain. I tried to share my umbrella with a young woman. She declined the offer saying that where she came from, rain was cause for celebration, a welcome relief from the otherwise hot and dry weather.

At St. Michael's, we were welcomed by Jeff Trumbower, dean of the college, biblical scholar and faithful UU religious educator. Both he and Sister Aileen Parris, a sacramental theologian, gave the students an overview of how religion was studied and practiced at the college. They represented two very different religious perspectives. Once again, the students were treated to an experience in authentic diversity. Their questions ranged on everything from the *DaVinci Code* to the Trinity. Our mobile class ended at the Islamic Society of Vermont, where we were greeted by Ezzedine Fatnazzi, the president of the Society, and his wife Cheryl. We all sat around one very large table and enjoyed a delicious Middle Eastern meal, my favorite kind—“one meal fits all.” Sharing food provided a perfect climax to a rich learning experience. I felt especially satisfied and grateful for the healthy diversity that our visitors witnessed throughout the day.

During the summer, I am reminded of how our meeting house, located at the top of Church Street, acts as kind of a magnet for visitors. I just happened to be coming downstairs one afternoon when six or seven women from Stuttgart, Germany, came in the side door. (How I wished I was Sylvia Holden, Jan Abbott or Eva Diner). They wanted to know if they could see the sanctuary. Once inside, they asked if this was a Catholic or Protestant Church. Except for one woman, their English was quite limited so again I gave thanks for the visual aid of our banners. The visitors were visibly impressed and approving.

It isn't always easy to explain our tradition, especially to foreign speakers, in terms of the "democratic method applied to religion," even though I'm indebted to Gary for this shorthand, capsulated description. Just as in a democracy, you need citizens who are educated about the issues in order to be able to vote wisely. In a tradition that applies the democratic method to religion, members need to be educated about religious pluralism; they need to appreciate the various wisdom traditions, the many wells from which UUism draws its life. In all of its breadth and depth, it is both liberal and challenging.

More and more educators are acknowledging that a misguided understanding of the separation between church and state has not served our schools well. There is nothing in the establishment clause of the first amendment that prevents classroom instruction *about* religion (Noddings, p. xv). This is not the same as teaching religion. Nel Noddings, Robert Nash and Charles Haynes are among these educators. Haynes is senior scholar at the First Amendment Center. He believes that teaching *about* religion is crucial to maintaining our secular democracy. In 1991, Noddings delivered the John Dewey Lecture at Columbia, then titled "Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief." Noddings speaks with authority to many. She points out that it is only in the second half of the 20th century that she found philosophers as well as educators entirely ignoring religion, even though this was a time when more and more people were interestingly into religion. Noddings had her doubts whether the new believers or those who simply ignored religion were for the most part intelligent in their belief or unbelief (Noddings, p. xiv).

In using the term "intelligent" in reference to belief or unbelief, this educator is not suggesting that belief or unbelief must be rational in a narrow sense. She means rationality in its broadest sense, a way of reasoning that acknowledges the longings of heart and soul and makes room for them. She says, "An education for intelligent belief or unbelief puts great emphasis on self-knowledge and that knowledge must come to grips with the emotional and spiritual as well as the intellectual and psychological" (Noddings, p. xiv). Both heart and mind need to be educated for belief or unbelief to be intelligent.

According to Noddings, it's not irrational to believe without either scientific evidence or the logic of the scholastics. But she does not find it intelligent to believe without thinking through the questions that our lives regularly present to us; to simply accept or reject is a failure of intelligence. We need to recognize both the positive and negative sides of

religion.

There is a fascinating mixture within religion. The very word brings to mind belief, politics, culture, reason and passion. An exchange of letters between columnist and author Nat Hentoff and Warren Allen Smith of the Secular Humanist Society illustrates this mixture. It began when Hentoff, in June of 1992, declared himself a “Jewish atheist” in a letter to the *Village Voice*. In response, Smith declared that Hentoff could no more be a Jewish atheist than anyone could be a black white. Instead, according to Smith, if Hentoff had given up religion, he had to call himself a secular humanist.

This is what Hentoff replied: “I have now come full circle. Several rabbis once ‘excommunicated’ me because I am for an independent Palestinian state. Now the secular humanists would censure me for calling myself Jewish. As I told the rabbis, I define myself and it ain’t nobody’s business but my own.”

Defining ourselves ain’t nobody’s business but our own. That may well be how many of you found your way to this community. Gandhi once said that there are as many different religions as there are people in the world. Often we are inspired by the witness of other people’s lives. A person in my Small Group once described his experience of Small Group as witnessing one another’s lives; the ways in which people grapple with questions of faith and meaning draw us together.

There is a flyer on our board outside publicizing the radio program that we as a society support, “Speaking of Faith.” Krista Tippett is the creator and host of the program. A number of you have heard it. Since 2003, it has become a national weekly broadcast. In reading her book by the same title, I learned of the broad experience as a journalist and diplomat that this interviewer brings to her conversations across the world’s traditions with theologians, scientists, ethicists and activists.

Even though it “ain’t nobody’s business,” still we are fascinated by why people do what they do. You wonder what influenced them or was a source of strength in their lives, such as what gave FBI Special Agent Coleen Rowley the courage to blow the whistle on her own agency in the wake of the 9/11 attacks—attacks that she believes her office might have prevented. We learn that it was the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian and Lutheran pastor, who was ultimately hanged by the Nazis for his role in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, that inspired Rowley. Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* also inspired the monk and poet Thich Nhat Hanh when war was consuming his own country in the 1960s. It’s what moved him from monastic isolation to working for reconciliation among the warring factions and ultimately he led the Buddhist delegation to the 1969 Paris Peace Talks. He credits the inspiration of Bonhoeffer for his own engaged form of Buddhism.

Nobel Prize winner and author Elie Wiesel has been a source of inspiration to many. Krista Tippett first met Wiesel in Berlin, twenty years ago. She was eager to interview him now about God, despite the fact that for years she had heard Wiesel described as someone who had lost his faith, he was even seen as an icon of the loss of faith.

In the course of the interview, she asks the author of *Night* if he will read aloud the passage in his book that is frequently quoted to prove that, given the horrors of the modern world, faith is illegitimate. Instead, Wiesel asks Tippet to read the passage descriptive of his Holocaust experience within which are these words: “Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.”

After her reading, Tippet asks her key question: “What happened after that? What happened after you lost your faith forever?” Wiesel responds: “What happened after that is in the book.” He says, “I went on praying.” Then Krista Tippet says that Wiesel gave her a great gift of words that transcends words. Instead of answering the problem of evil, he translates it into prayer—prayer with room for both questions and answers, anger and mystery, in the following way. In addressing God, he uses the word You, as other Jewish mystics like Martin Buber have done. This is an excerpt from his prayer:

I no longer ask You for either happiness or Paradise; all I ask of You
Is to listen and let me be aware of You listening. I no longer ask You
to resolve my questions, only to receive them and make them part
of You. I no longer ask you for either rest or wisdom, I only ask You
not to close me to gratitude, be it of the most trivial kind, or to
surprise and friendship...

In making the difficult choice whether to believe or not to believe, we are dealing with a strong mixture of family history, culture, reason and passion. In a congregation as diverse as our own, listening to one another’s stories offers us one way to make an intelligent choice. May we take the time to listen, to witness each other’s lives, to listen to the ways in which people grapple with questions of faith and meaning. It draws us together.

Sources:

Noddings, Nel (1993): *Education for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*, (pp. xiv, xv), New York, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Tippet, Krista (2007): *Speaking of Faith*, New York, Viking Penguin.