

“The End of Faith: One Reader’s Response”
Sermon by Joseph Bednarik
Delivered at Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Sunday, February 18, 2007

Good morning. It’s an honor to be with you today, and to share the same pulpit that was recently occupied by such luminaries as George Washington, Mahatma Gandhi, and Robert Fulghum.

As we begin this morning’s sermon, I’d like to revisit the invocation of the *Upanishads* that served as our responsive reading, and ask that we read the text aloud and together:

May the Lord of Love protect us.
May the Lord of Love nourish us.
May the Lord of Love strengthen us.
May we realize the Lord of Love.
May we live with love for all;
May we live in peace with all. (1)

Consider this powerful prayer—the first half asks for protection, nourishment, and strength from the Lord of Love; the second half calls for action—for us to realize—I would even argue to *become*, the Lord of Love, and to then live with certain qualities: *with* love and *in* peace. And, like a Greek tragedy, where the end of the play is revealed at the beginning, our chorus just prayed the answer to this sermon: Realization, love, and peace. And like a Greek tragedy, this sermon will visit some dark places.

As we enter this time of talking and listening, I want to acknowledge the power and genius in this room—in this room of glass and wood, this room of good intentions and noble actions; this room where we gather, week after week, listening and talking, singing and contemplating; this room where water and air and earth are used to initiate children; where marriages begin and deaths are mourned and lives celebrated; a room where flames mark our joys and sorrows. A room where the focal point is a clear circle—a window through which we could, as Benjamin Sáenz wrote in the poem we read earlier, “memorize the blueness of a sky.” And I’ll add memorize rain clouds, those miraculous floating sweet-water generators. All this to say: revolutions have started in this room, and in countless rooms like it around the globe. We are not alone.

For the past two months I’ve enjoyed the great privilege of reading a provocative and timely book with a group of fellow QUUFers in the early bird reading group. We’ve gathered every Sunday morning before the first service to sit facing one another—in that amorphous, ever-shifting shape called “the Unitarian circle”—to discuss a text that has sparked much conversation and controversy throughout the country: Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith*. The subtitle is enough to takes one’s breath away: “Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason.”

We finished discussing the book this morning, and I stand before you now to provide one reader’s take, and the effect that a text can have on a life.

The End of Faith is one of those books that carries a special charge for me, as several friends—from diverse corners of my life—each approached me sometime over the past year to say “You *have* to read this book.” One friend from the east coast, a devout atheist (dare I say “fundamentalist atheist”?) held that it efficiently and unequivocally proved the folly of God worship; another friend from the west coast, a young real estate tycoon, said it ruined two days of his precious Hawaiian vacation. I tend to listen when friends tell me, “You *have* to read this book.” My godless friend from the East even took it upon himself to send me a copy.

But the book came into my life at a vulnerable time. I had just read, in quick succession, a book on Christian fundamentalism in the United States—with the provocative title *Stealing Jesus*—and another on growing Islamic fundamentalism in Europe. I felt the world closing in, and myself in a state of anxious retreat. I had stopped listening to radio news because I was fatigued with war news, polarized politics, the voices of partisans and fanatics shrieking at one another. When I finished the first chapter of *The End of Faith*—entitled “Reason in Exile”—I instinctively knew that I needed to read this one in the company of others, and was delighted and relieved when I learned that the QUUF book group would be tackling the text.

There is something quite amazing about reading a book with a group of people: The text becomes multifaceted and fellow readers wander down paths of discourse that you would never think of. This particular group contained pretty much every skill you would want in a village: carpenter, doctor, nurse, attorney, marine, minister, activist, teacher. A good group to get caught in a snowstorm with...

The most haunting aspect of the group, to me, is that one of the members, as a young boy growing up in Germany, had actually laid eyes on Adolf Hitler. And throughout his youth listened to speeches of Hitler on the radio, and saw him on newsreels before the movies. When he told me this, he mentioned that Shirley Temple and Adolf Hitler are forever fused in his brain because Shirley Temple was so often sharing a movie screen with Hitler. What a stark binary: Shirley Temple / Adolf Hitler... tapdancing / goosestepping. That I was sharing a conversation and ideas with someone who once witnessed in body one of human history’s maniacal idealists somehow made the *ideas* of this book pop out in three-dimensions. Ideas are serious stuff—especially ideas rooted in fundamentalism, extremism, fanaticism.

There are two short quotes I would like to read from *The End of Faith*:

“We will see that the greatest problem confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself. Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism [taking every word in a holy text as literally true] and religious violence can never be adequately opposed.” (2)

This quote struck me hard—was underlined and starred in my book—and was, quite frankly, hard to take in. And there were many others, like this one: “religious tolerance... is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.” (3)

Clearly I was being indicted. And *felt* indicted. What was it that I believed that could help curb

the ever-growing violence in the world; to protect myself, my family, my community and my world from violence and oblivion? My fellow group-mates don't know this, but I listened to a lot more reggae music to lift my spirits...

I also reached for other texts, for inspiration, nourishment, understanding, and for transfusions of energy and ideas. At one point while writing this sermon I looked down at the books littering the floor around the desk: the poetry of Antonio Machado; the Jefferson Bible; Krishnamurti; Dr. Seuss; Gandhi; Rumi; the Koran. Ring buoys all, but the life raft came from a book discovered at random at the one "big box" retail store I willingly enter: Goodwill. There I was, in the cookbook section, and found a misfiled book entitled *Progressive Muslims. Thank God*. Here it was, finally, that gift from the universe, an anthology of intelligence and sanity, in a reading life that was becoming increasingly stressful.

[Aside: The "progressive Muslim" voice is what many in the group were longing for, and the silence was deafening. Harris relayed an illustrative story: When the Ayatollah Khomeini placed a fatwah on the novelist Salman Rushdie, there was very little dissent or protest to be heard from the Muslim community. Even the former folk singer Cat Stevens—who has converted to Islam—issued a statement that the fatwah was justified. When Cat Stevens supports the assassination of a novelist you know the water's getting hot.]

At this point you should have that Simon and Garfunkel lyric wafting through your consciousness, "I have my books and my poetry to protect me."

But *The End of Faith* wasn't protecting me. It was calling me out, slicing into some of my deepest held beliefs. Consider *tolerance*, what I held as a belief in "live and let live." Being bit of a word person I poked around the word "tolerance" and grew uncomfortable: It's roots come from "medieval toxicology and pharmacology, marking how much poison a body could 'tolerate' before it would succumb to death."⁴ Even the meanings in a modern Webster's aren't very attractive. Consider the primary definition: "capacity to endure pain or hardship." Consider the second: "the ability to endure the effects of a drug or food or of a physiologic insult without exhibiting the usual unfavorable effects. Number three: "Sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own; the act of allowing something."

Catch that: The act of allowing something. *Act* to allow. Tolerance is not passive.

This was a deeply held value of mine? To withstand poison, indulge, endure hardship and allow?

As a result of *The End of Faith*, my notion of "tolerance"—both the word and the action—are radically transforming. I instinctively recoil from it's opposite: intolerance. *That* word strikes me as poisonous, in the same family as fundamentalism, extremism, and fanaticism.

On one level it seems a petty exercise to play with mere *words* when we witness—from our safe coffee shops tucked deep inside the Empire—and it is *our* Empire—the world daily exploding.

Alas, as Harris asserts, most of the explosions we suffer are rooted in words, and what human

beings *believe* about words—and how an almighty God spoke the words. And how grotesque it is that God’s word can justify a young man strapping on a vest of explosives and boarding a crowded bus in Bagdad? How grotesque it is that a sniper can justify the murder of a doctor who provides abortions at a clinic in Buffalo, New York?

If this is the case, I do not believe in God’s word. I *cannot* believe in God’s word.

And I’m not going to let us off the hook here, saying that it is a human misinterpretation of God’s word. In the case of the suicide bomber who destroyed himself in jihad, he and his family and millions of other devout Muslims now believe he is in paradise, and was justified in acting as he did.

Of course there is no God who blows up buses. Love does not drop bombs. Truth does not shoot doctors. No *reasonable* God. No loving God. No just God.

Gandhi once wrote, “Prayer is not an old woman’s idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, it is the most potent instrument of action.”(5) I call forth again our earlier prayer, our responsive prayer, our prayer made of words:

May the Lord of Love protect us.
May the Lord of Love nourish us.
May the Lord of Love strengthen us.
May we realize the Lord of Love.
May we live with love for all;
May we live in peace with all.

I stand before you now to say that I no longer want to be tolerant. I no longer want to withstand poison, to indulge, to endure hardship, to allow. I want to be as intolerant as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., as intolerant as Thoreau, Dr. Seuss, Terry Tempest Williams, and Bob Marley. And like Ruby Bridges, that amazing six-year-old girl who broke the color line within the New Orleans school system, I want to walk through the angry, hateful, unreasonable mobs to keep the schools open. To keep *reason* alive and thriving.

Another aspect of *The End of Faith* I’d like to touch upon is the absurdity of faith-based religion. By “faith-based” Harris means beliefs about reality that have no credible evidence, such as “life after death” or “Jesus was born of a virgin.” It is undeniable that we operate our lives within worlds of belief but, as Harris states, “the basic fact is that for our beliefs to be truly representative of the world, they must stand in the right relationship *to* the world.” (6)

Here I find deep resonance with the UU principal of “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” where “humanist teachings...counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science.” The call to reason—the demand of it—is one of the central tenets that keeps this community thriving. And, I would argue, helps make this particular religious practice a *positive* and *active* force in the world, though the Christians down the street know we’re destined for hell and to the Muslims on jihad we’re infidels worth killing.

Harris did a remarkable job in showing just how absolutely urgent it is to act against the actions of religious zealots—and I include our present administration in this description—who are acting on faith rooted in competing books written by the Author Almighty. The Koran is straight dictation from God to the Prophet Mohammed, and the Bible, to millions of fundamentalist Christians, is *literally* true, word for word, to the point where the earth itself is around 10,000 years old, contrary to mountains of dinosaur bones and carbon dating. I won't go into the acerbic way in which Harris attacks these notions, or delineate the self-contradictions of these Holy texts—though I fully encourage you to do so—but to highlight how dangerous it is to have untold millions of humans believe and have faith in what these books—or the interpretation of these books—say and proscribe. Here are two statements, rooted in faith, taken as true to hundreds of millions of people:

Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior or you're damned to hell. *Forever.*

The men who flew planes into the World Trade Center are seated at the right hand of God.

There we have it: heaven and hell. Believe and live; deny and die. But not only die—be *damned*. Talk about an us/them washed/unwashed Shirley Temple/Adolf Hitler paradigm. The only problem is that one person's saved brother is another person's infidel.

By God, whose right?

Harken back, if you will, to the "Time for All Ages," earlier in the service. I read the children the classic Dr. Seuss story "The Zax," where Fundamentalist Z and Fundamentalist A become paralyzed in their conflicting beliefs and behaviors and they stand, chest to chest—arms crossed in an "X"—for days then months then years. The world builds up around them, and even constructs a "ZAX ByPass." Unfortunately for our world, Z and A are well armed, zealous, and have paradise to look forward to. A bypass isn't so easy.

And here and now you and I get to decide how to build the world, how to move forward into our lives and the lives of our fellow Earthlings. One of the mantras that came forth in the early bird reading group: What do we *do*? What do *we* do? *What* do we do? In response I began to make a list of verbs, and then recalled a very potent list from one of the holy people currently walking the planet, the Dali Lama.

And so I close with his Holiness's 19-point list entitled "Instructions for Life"(7):

1. Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
2. When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
3. Follow the three R's:
 - Respect for self
 - Respect for others and
 - Responsibility for all your actions.
4. Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck.
5. Learn the rules so you know how to break them properly.
6. Don't let a little dispute injure a great friendship.

7. When you realize you've made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it.
8. Spend some time alone every day.
9. Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values.
10. Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.
11. Live a good, honorable life. Then when you get older and think back, you'll be able to enjoy it a second time.
12. A loving atmosphere in your home is the foundation for your life.
13. In disagreements with loved ones deal only with the current situation. Don't bring up the past.
14. Share your knowledge. It's a way to achieve immortality.
15. Be gentle with the earth.
16. Once a year, go someplace you've never been before.
17. Remember that the best relationship is one in which your love for each other exceeds your need for each other.
18. Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.
19. And finally, approach love and cooking with reckless abandon. (7)

Words to live by: Approach love. Reckless abandon.

Amen.

Footnotes:

1. *God Makes the Rivers to Flow: Sacred Literature of the World*, selected by Eknath Easwaran (Nilgiri, 2003). Page 29.
2. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, by Sam Harris (Norton, 2005). Page 45.
3. Ibid. Page 15.
4. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, edited by Omid Safi (Oneworld, 2003). Page 24.
5. *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, edited by Thomas Merton (New Directions, 1965). Page 70.
6. Harris, page 250.
7. A day after delivering this sermon, someone from the congregation alerted me to a posting on the internet that claimed this list was not authored by the Dali Lama: <http://www.snopes.com/inboxer/hoaxes/dalai.asp>. I still think the list is a packed with tremendously good ideas and, if given the chance, the Dali Lama would likely agree with much, if not all, of what it says. I'll ask him the next time we play squash.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by guest speaker, Joseph Bednarik, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on February 18, 2007. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)