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*Answering Paul Bramadat: A Minister's Reflection on Post-secularism,  
Expanding Dialogues and the Value of Myths*

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I don't know what it is, but every time I read or hear the hard-line new atheists like Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris write or speak, I get depressed. You know these guys, the ones who are convinced that everything that is wrong with the world today is because of religion. Why is it that their arguments depress me? After all, I was raised by parents who spent much of their young-adult years working as labour organizers in the United States – that is until the cold chill of McCarthyism blew across the land. No matter what happened politically in their lives, my parents taught me, as Marx taught, that religion was the opiate of the masses. My parents were humanists to the core, who believed that you only had one life and you'd better make good use of it. There was no place for mystery, transcendence, religion or God in their understanding of the universe. They were practical people who spent most of their working lives serving oppressed communities.

You can imagine what a shock it was to my parents when I declared my intention to become a minister. Oh, they were supportive, but also bemused. How did I end up as the religious one in the family? Honestly, what did they expect, having sent me to synagogue and Hebrew school as a young child? It was a strange plan, indeed, to introduce me to Judaism as a child and assume that I would approach the teachings as rationally and logically as they would as adults. But I imbibed a love for the mysterious, for the beauty of an eternal light shining in a simple wooden sanctuary, for a vast unexplainable thing I could only call faith. I never lost that love, even after a long journey through an empty desert of yearning when my family broke from the Temple and introduced me to atheism.

The break from faith to nothingness left a huge hole inside me. It was a hole that I would only come to fill as a young adult, when I became active in my first Unitarian Universalist congregation in New Jersey, more than twenty-five years ago. I made the decision to become a Unitarian Universalist during the Jewish High Holy Days. The timing was an intentional act. I felt I had finally found a place where I could reclaim my religious past, honour my humanist/socialist upbringing, and open my heart to new ideas. That first step led me down a long path that eventually called me into our ministry.

I remember my parents visiting the Unitarian Universalist First Parish of Concord Massachusetts while I was the director of religious education there, a few years before I entered seminary. That particular Sunday, wouldn't you know it, the minister asked me if I would tell a parable of Jesus to the children during the service. So, I chose the story of the Rich Young Ruler. A young rich man asks Jesus what he must do to live a good life. Jesus tells him that he must sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. Then, he will have riches in heaven. When the young man turns away, crestfallen, Jesus tells his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

I thought for sure such a message of social gospel would touch my parents' hearts. But all my parents could hear were those words *Jesus* and *God*. Afterwards, my mother confessed that, as she sat there listening to me, she found she was asking herself, "Where did we go wrong?" (Just so I don't leave you with the wrong impression, despite her worries about my

willingness to tread where no good Jewish atheist should tread, my mother became the most ardent supporter of my ministerial formation.)

I tell you this personal story because in honest, post-modern practice, it is always important for the speaker to acknowledge her own cultural or religious context and bias. Beyond that, I want you to know that when it comes to discussions of the religious versus the secular, the transcendent versus the immanent, modernity versus ancient tradition, I am someone who has lived these debates from the inside out.

Add to that what you may consider the bizarre or unfortunate curse of having grown up and come of age in the United States – mind you, always in big cities: Cleveland, Chicago, New York and Boston. Then mix in the unique and wonderful experience of living in Quebec and serving the Unitarian Church of Montreal for five years. Layered onto my Americanism is an exposure to Quebec that has taken place during a time when questions of reasonable accommodation are bumping up against a world that sees itself as secular yet lives each day trying to make sense out of the vestiges of its mainly Catholic past. I stand firmly in the middle of many contrasting experiences as I speak to you today: Socialist, Jewish, former atheist, full of faith, American, and Quebecoise. I am a permanent resident of Canada and I am looking forward to this July when I can finally apply for citizenship. I love this country and I feel grateful and privileged to be here.

A year ago, at this very meeting, I was blown over by the keynote speech delivered by Dr. Paul Bramadat, director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria (and son of our beloved Jane Bramadat, minister emeritus of the First Unitarian Church of Victoria). I especially appreciated the way Paul synthesized Canadian religious history. But what really got me thinking was Paul challenging us to seriously explore the role Unitarianism will play in a world moving towards post-secularism. He urged us to consider what our response will be as religion finds its way back into the public square.

You know the statistics that many are projecting for the future in North America. Visible minorities will move toward the majority, and Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims will have an increasingly significant presence in Canadian society as a whole. More than that, there is a global shift that is happening toward greater religious engagement, not just among visible minorities, and most notably among Christians, as I'll explain later. Whatever the future make-up of our population may be, Canada can expect to see growing numbers of people who no longer wish to keep their religious lives separate from their public lives. As Unitarians, we can respond to this changing world by retreating into our own fortresses, or we can play a significant role in creating a space for interfaith dialogue – not just with those whom we feel comfortably represent the liberal voices from the world's religions.

But how do we leave our fortresses? How do we engage in an external dialogue with fervently religious people when we are struggling with our own internal theological diversity? This is what I want to address in my lecture today. We are living in a time of accelerating change. We can hardly catch our own breath, but if we are to offer anything to the dawning future, we will need to start wrestling with these issues.

I'm not here to offer any formulaic solutions. How we each respond will have to unfold within our own separate local realities. This is what my fellow ministers and I call contextual theology. What will be needed here in Toronto will be different from what will be needed in Montreal, Calgary, Vancouver and everywhere else in between and beyond. I am simply here to urge you to roll up your sleeves to get to work on what I think is going to shape our future relevance as a movement.

Wake up, is what I heard Paul say. Not everyone sees the world as you do. Unitarianism, as we know it today, rose out of Christianity to embrace secularism and liberalism, but the world around us is changing drastically. The stories that we hold sacred may no longer fit. That's what caught my breath last year and sent my head spinning.

For those of you who weren't in Victoria when Paul spoke, he began by saying that our ideologies and the stories we tell ourselves change over time to meet our new needs of understanding. To elaborate, he took us through a crash course in Canadian religious history that merits repeating here. (This is me, paraphrasing Paul.)

When the French and British first came to Canada, they believed they had a right to impose their religious ideologies upon the land and the people they found. The state and religion overlapped each other. Later, during the time of Confederation, a weak state enabled the church to become the shadow establishment.<sup>1</sup> I know I'm painting with very broad brushstrokes here. But, as Paul suggested, consider the way in which the Anglican and other Protestant churches enacted the state's plans for Native American assimilation, or the way in which the Roman Catholic Church was in charge of people's daily lives in Quebec. I have learned firsthand in Montreal just how many people are still smarting from the wounds inflicted by life strictly defined by a very particular religious divide.

Ultimately, the shadow establishment didn't meet the needs of the waves of immigrants that started to arrive, mostly from Europe, during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The new immigrants came with different stories to tell, and they chafed at the shadow establishment's control. Of course, the situation in Quebec unravelled in its own way, as things became ripe for the Quiet Revolution that practically separated church and state overnight.

Whatever the local reasons and whatever the details, the backlash came. Secularism rose out of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 70s to solve the problems created by the shadow establishment. In response to a world that had defined everything by Christianity, secularism promised to create a fairer, more rational world. These were ideas that fit perfectly with Unitarianism as it shifted from its Christian foundations to a more Humanist theology. Religion and government were now separated from each other. The state became

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the history of the "shadow establishment," and to hear Dr. Paul Bramadat's key note speech given at the CUC Annual Conference and Meeting in Victoria, May 2010, go to: <http://www.cuc.ca/video/index.htm>

neutral and religion was left to be private and personal, outside of the public sphere, though the separation has never been as complete as we would like to think.

Alongside secularism, we tell ourselves a story of the wonderfully multicultural nation of Canada. This was a story that drew me here as an immigrant from the US and I still believe it. Admittedly, my experience is based almost entirely on my life in Montreal. I do see tensions here, but they seem small in comparison to the tension I have experienced in the US. Everything is relative. I also think it is important to add something here that I would not have known coming from outside. It's something I'm learning many Canadians don't realize. Multiculturalism has been a particularly sore point among the Aboriginal peoples here. Asking Native peoples to participate in the Canadian multicultural vision is akin to asking them to function as immigrants in their own land. It has completely sidestepped Canada's historic mistreatment of the people who lived here long before Europeans arrived.

This was Paul's warning: Beware of claims that we are a mosaic. We may delude ourselves into thinking we are open to diversity. But look closely. Our government calendars still follow the Christian year. Listen to the kind of music that is played in the public square. Canadian society may not be overtly Christian, but it favours those who are influenced by liberal Christianity and secularism. The ground rules are set by the dominant culture. To those who grew up within the dominant culture, these are the subtle messages that tend to be invisible, while to those who grew up outside of that culture, the message is anything but subtle.

Multiculturalism emphasizes the welcoming of ethnic and racial diversity, but we get very uncomfortable when it comes to religious diversity. We don't really want to go there. We only want to be in interfaith dialogue with those who comfortably play by the secular rules, and are as liberal as we are. But the ideology of secularism may be losing its hold today. That's what we are seeing happen in Europe. That's the challenge growing here. We are moving toward a post-secular age.

Here's the crux of Paul's argument: There is a dehumanizing side to secularism that demands that religious people leave behind a significant part of themselves when they enter the public square. Since everything except religion can be discussed, religious people cannot speak in the terms that inform their choices. In order to be heard, they must speak in neutral terms. It forces people to be less than fully themselves, to lie or to hide their beliefs.

Those who come out of a Western European Protestant tradition may easily see religion as something that is entirely private. Religion is between you, the individual, and your higher power. Separating our religious selves from our public selves is perfectly logical. But this is not the case for many people who come from traditions where religion is something more complex, public, all-encompassing and intimately connected with family or

community – “not some tidy compartmentalize-able dimension of one’s life but rather the overarching canopy under which all human life unfolds.”<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, Paul cautioned us that we Unitarians are standard bearers of a very particular ideology that arose at a very particular time in history to solve a very particular set of problems. But when the people who have been rendered invisible by an ideology rise up and refuse to be invisible anymore, that ideology will die and a new one will take its place. We will continue to change, and our stories will change with us. The tide is turning and there’s no going back.

Months later, when I preached to my congregation about Paul’s address, I found myself stopping in the middle of my sermon to say, “You know, this may be the most challenging sermon I bring to you this year.” That led some of our elder members to respond afterwards, “Oh, no, that wasn’t challenging at all. It was *relevant*.” But that very afternoon I received an impassioned e-mail from a younger member of the congregation:

“What’s this about a post-secular world? What’s this about secularism failing? I thought secularism in Canada was going rather well, actually. And if it’s threatened, then it’s something I’d want to work to protect. If we give up on secularism, what takes its place? I associate secularism with our society’s progress towards gender equality and gay rights. I associate it with access to birth control, abortions, safe sex and sex education. I worry about losing precious, hard-won ground on these issues if traditional religions begin to more strongly influence public policy.”

That is the rub, isn’t it? We fear that if we are not vigilant, we will lose the culture wars. The fact that some immigrant groups are refusing to leave their religion at home is raising fear all over the West. Think of Angela Merkel saying that *Multikulti* had failed in Germany. Listen carefully to what she said, “We feel bound to the Christian image of humanity, that is what defines us. Those who do not accept this are in the wrong place here.” Or consider this past February when the Quebec legislature voted to ban the carrying of the kirpan, the Sikh ceremonial dagger, into the halls of the national assembly. Louise Beaudoin of the Parti Québécois was widely quoted as saying, “Canadian multiculturalism is not a Quebec value.” Before you take that to be an example of the backwardness of Quebec, take careful stock of the fears in your own communities.

Consider Mahfooz Kanwar, a member of the Muslim Canadian Congress and an immigrant from Pakistan, who told a reporter of the Victoria Times “he is pleased that Canada has citizens from every country and corner in the world, as it has enriched this country immensely. But it is official multiculturalism – the state policy ‘that entrenches the lie’ that

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Bramadat, *Political Minefields: Religion in Post-Secular Society*, Breakfast on the Hill, March 12, 2009, p. 5

all cultures and beliefs are of equal value and equal validity that he objects to.”<sup>3</sup>

He told the reporter, “The fact is, Canada has an enviable culture based on Judeo-Christian values – not Muslim values – with British and French law and traditions and that’s why it’s better than all of the other places in the world.”

Or consider British Prime Minister David Cameron, who said in his speech delivered to the 47<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference in February, “Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have failed to provide a vision of society to which [young immigrants] feel they want to belong... We have tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values. So when a white person holds objectionable views – racism, for example – we rightly condemn them. But when equally unacceptable views or practices have come from someone who isn’t white, we’ve been too cautious, frankly even fearful, to stand up to them.”<sup>4</sup>

In one camp you have voices that are saying that Judeo-Christian ideology is superior to all others. You don’t have to listen too closely between the lines to know that they are mostly expressing their anxiety about Islam. At the other extreme end of the spectrum you have voices that are raging against any religious expression. They say that religion is the root of all evil, and argue that the total rejection of all things religious is the only hope for the future.

Then we let our fears take over. Here’s a recent example: A youthful revolution is struggling to establish democracy across the Middle East. For a few weeks, we rejoice with the footage of people filling Tahrir Square in Cairo. We see photos of Christians and Muslims protecting each other in prayer. Then come the worries. If democracy is won, certain extremist religious groups will come into power. Suddenly, we are barraged with menacing photos of women whose eyes are only visible from within black shrouds. What better way to visually telegraph that the future is doomed?

Things are changing rapidly in Egypt, as churches have been burned in recent weeks. I can’t begin to fully comprehend what is going on. But every time I see those photos, I hear the underlying message that I have heard spoken by otherwise perfectly calm and reasonable people. They warn me that if we don’t act swiftly, Sharia Law will take over even in Canada. Our women will be forced to wear burqahs or niqabs. We’ll be flung back to pre-modern times.

It is easy to get pulled into the maelstrom of fear. In the past year or so, I have been e-mailed numerous articles written by individuals in France and the Netherlands warning that, if liberals do not act soon, all societal gains that have been made will be lost to the religious fanatics who are taking over the world. They argue that the appropriate response is to tell immigrants that they must adopt “our” values or go home. But these immigrants

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<sup>3</sup> Licia Corbella, “Pushing Back Against False Multiculturalism,” *Victoria Times Colonist*, February 15, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

are often the children and grandchildren of people who were drawn to Europe and North America generations ago to build cities and to provide much needed services. They have established themselves in the West. "Home" no longer exists.

Believe me, I do not want to set aside the gains of secularism. I do not want to see us rolling back the progress we have made in women's rights, reproductive rights, or equal marriage. We have to keep on fighting these battles in the political arena. But I believe that means keeping a healthy, less anxious and more nuanced perspective on things.

I want to move our conversation away from fear and anxiety and place it in the realm of the reality of what we can do to respond to a world that may be radically changing. Rather than feeling helpless and pitting ourselves against each other, we can play a significant role in moving beyond the narrow focus of "us" versus "them."

So let's go back and take a closer look at our own history. In his book *A Secular Age*, Montreal's own philosopher Charles Taylor traces the development of secularism over 500 years of history beginning with the Protestant Reformation, followed by the Age of Enlightenment, to the present. Western society has come through a long period of history where believing in God was the cultural norm. It was virtually impossible for people to imagine life without belief in God (even when the orthodox persecuted heretics, the central issue was always differing beliefs about God). As scientific exploration became freer, and moved into a non-religious realm, new ways of understanding reality became possible. Over time, personal religious practice shifted from a reliance on God and church to a reliance on self. The idea of a God who provided for human needs got supplanted by a God upstaged by science, who had to take a more distant, transcendent position, until the idea of God became so distant that it was no longer necessary in people's lives. This shifting perspective began among intellectual elites until it eventually spread across whole swaths of Western society.

These were the trends that ultimately culminated in the social revolutions that laid the foundation for the society we live in today, where it is seen as perfectly normal that people who believe in God co-exist side-by-side with those who do not. This, says Taylor, is what is remarkable about the secular age we live in. After hundreds of years of continuity, being religious is no longer the default expectation. Society is no longer revolving around one central idea.

Think of us, as Unitarians and Universalists. We were born out of the Protestant Reformation and shaped by the Enlightenment. We have argued for freedom of thought, for toleration and for reason throughout our history. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many within our movement saw science as the great promise of humanity. We could shed our Christianity and our faith in God. We would have faith in humanity, in ourselves, instead. When you read the sermons of John Dietrich, one of the founders of Unitarian Humanism at the turn of the twentieth century, and when you read the sermons of his fellow humanists of the era, you see such hopefulness for the power of human ingenuity. You see how the seeds of humanism were planted, how perfectly we moved with the times, how much secularism and liberal theology fit our social context. Yet it didn't take long for World



Wars, the threat of nuclear annihilation and the pseudo-scientific experiments of the holocaust to challenge our hopefulness. You know the rest of the story. Existential angst comes with the fear or the recognition that neither humanity nor God will save us from ourselves.

For a period of time, Humanism gave shape to our movement. It became the defining central idea for many, the “anything but God” option. We would be “not Christian,” and “not God loving,” not anything we used to be. But today, we too are no longer revolving around one central idea. I remember the late African-American minister Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley challenging a group of us at a Religious Education conference at Ferry Beach in Maine in 1997. She told us that, before Unitarian Universalists could address our concerns about developing greater racial and ethnic diversity, we needed to face our own discomfort with the theological diversity within our congregations. “Look how afraid you are to speak openly about your own beliefs. You are suffering from your own intolerance,” Marjorie reflected.

I realize now that those words were the catalyst that drove me through seminary. The Unitarian Universalism that became the foundation of my ministry was shaped by an openness to a wide range of individual faith. We could be believers and non-believers and everything in between. We would come together to share and learn from each other’s differences. This was the beauty of what we had to offer the world. This was my own Unitarian Universalist myth in the making.

Only recently have I realized how much our “not Christian” stamp still determines much of our discourse. When you strike a hammer against a piece of metal, the indentation remains. Even when we claim it is absent, Christianity still shapes our discourse. Our dominant Unitarian Universalist culture exists in reaction to orthodox Christianity. Since I don’t come from a Christian background, this can feel stifling. When I say the words God or faith, those words come out of my Jewish upbringing. My memories are beautiful and precious to me. *Blessed are you, baruch atah*, seems the right way to start a prayer. Yet those who have come to Unitarian Universalism rejecting Christianity often only hear these words from the perspective of their own Christian context. They cannot begin to visualize how different my context may be from theirs. Not having lived as a Christian, it can be as equally difficult for me to recognize the buttons I may be pushing inadvertently.

These days we are seeing more and more newcomers who are not fleeing from Christianity or other faith traditions. Instead, they are often unchurched seekers looking for something they call spirituality or even, shock of all shocks, God. As one diehard Unitarian Humanist in her 80s recently said to me, “I’ve finally got it figured out. These young adults are seekers, while I’m not seeking anything.”

However each of us may express our Unitarianism or Universalism, it is the rare person among us who lives a truly integrated spiritual life. Many of us dream of having time to meditate or to be connected to the sacred earth or something holy each day, yet other commitments and distractions get in the way. I meet people longing for a more integrated expression of this faith everywhere I go. I see it in the numbers of people who are

considering studying for our ministry. There is a craving to make life count on a much deeper level. So place the image of the seekers on one hand. On the other hand, place the image of those who are worried about extreme religiosity. This is the daily tension we hold in our congregations.

Outside in the wider world, and perhaps in our minds as well, the lines have been drawn between two fundamentalisms, between those with orthodox faith and those who are orthodox atheists. But between these two poles lives a whole range of experience. When Harvey Cox wrote his famous book *Secular City* in 1965, he urged the church to become relevant in the secular world, to get out into the street and make meaning in people's lives. Otherwise, the church would die as secularism took hold and the old-time religion was no longer needed. Many mainstream denominations have indeed failed in this regard. Their numbers continue to dwindle. Others have seemingly found the key to success, because they are responding to people's deepest needs, more than many of us may realize.

Before I came to Montreal, I did research for a study that was exploring the role of religious institutions in the urban metropolis. Much of my work put me in contact with evangelical immigrant communities in Boston. To my surprise, what I found was not the narrow-mindedness I expected. Instead, I discovered an openness that made space for the most wounded and broken. These congregations welcomed with open arms those who were rejected elsewhere. Sadly, this was true only as long as you weren't openly gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual – and that was a bitter pill to swallow as I delved into the life of these communities. But for those who were mentally ill, impoverished, alcoholic, addicted, lost, they knew they had found a spiritual home that loved them first and then slowly guided them into belief. The effectiveness of these communities was both chilling and fascinating to watch because it was done, right or wrong, with tremendous sincerity – and it worked. These communities were swelling in size, while the mainstream churches nearby were nearly empty.

My experience taught me that if we do not speak to people's hearts, they will go elsewhere. There are plenty of reasons why people seek out religious community. In the West, we are living in times that can feel soulless as culture has become more about consumption and less about meaning. I think it all comes down to a deep hunger that perhaps all of humanity shares. In 2007, Charles Taylor mused that secularism was failing to respond to people's deepest yearnings, even as traditional religion failed to respond to the fullness of human expression. Taylor was convinced that the thirst for transcendence would increase and become socially acceptable once again. *C'est-à-dire*, when one ideology fails to meet people's needs it will be replaced by another.

In the 1960s, Harvey Cox and others imagined that religion would be swallowed up by secularism, yet, in the past few decades, we have seen just the opposite. The great religious historian Karen Armstrong says the world is witnessing the death of the Death of God. There are those who are convinced that, when we look back upon this time in history, we will see religion as both the positive and negative defining force of this century. Writers John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge say, "The reality is that God is back." These two British authors (an editor and a bureau chief, respectively, for *The Economist*) have

travelled the world observing the increasing role religion is playing in public and intellectual life. In their aptly titled book, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, they document a trend toward religious adherence that is being driven by upwardly mobile, educated middle classes, not by the poor and downtrodden.

They write, "In both Turkey and India, [for example,] modernization has helped to create the up-and-coming bourgeoisie that Atatürk and Nehru prayed for; but these people are the most fervent supporters of the religious parties. In urban China the link between commercial prosperity and religion can be strikingly explicit."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the authors begin their book with a powerful look at the growing Christian movements in China. The numbers are astounding, they say. The authors believe that Christianity, more than any other religion in the world, is going to be on the rise, while Islam will account for a much smaller percentage of the world's faithful. They conclude that, no matter what religions are practiced, more and more people will be flocking to faith by choice, not by inheritance.

Micklethwait and Wooldridge look to the past to tease out the roots of this phenomenon. Once upon a time in Europe, monarchies and states determined religion -- *cuius regio, eius religio* – the one who rules picks the religion. People were born into religious traditions and that's what they practiced. Hence, the secular revolutions in Europe were a rejection of state religion, plain and simple. It was a matter of rejecting what once permeated all of life. In people's lived experience, there was one religion or no religion. I've seen this firsthand in Quebec and in Europe. My husband's aunts, uncles and cousins in Italy still can't comprehend how we could choose to be something called Unitarian, let alone how I, as a woman, could be an ordained minister. It just doesn't compute, even though they are all highly educated and radically non-practicing Catholics.

The picture in the United States is extremely different. It is a picture that can be hard to fathom, especially when we see religion playing such a strong role in US politics these days. Yet we forget that, in the US, religion has always been independent of the state, from the nation's very inception. The fact that the US never had a state religion gave many religious groups the freedom to flourish (including Unitarians and Universalists). "Almost alone in the world," Micklethwait and Wooldridge write, "Americans saw no contradiction between embracing the values of the Enlightenment and republicanism while at the same time clinging to their religious principles. [In contrast,] revolutionary France defined itself by its hostility to religion..."<sup>6</sup>

What about Canada, you ask? Richard Gwyn writes this in his book about John A. Macdonald, *The Man Who Made Us*, covering the period of 1815-1867:

"Many Canadians...regarded with deep misgiving the absolute division of church and state in the United States. ... several of the Founding Fathers...had expressed doubts

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<sup>5</sup> John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2009. p. 18

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

about the divinity of Christ. ... There was also lively concern in Canada about the experiment in multiculturalism being attempted south of the border. ... Canadians were aghast at the gangs in the U.S. cities, at the lynchings of Negroes, at the wars against Indians. ... Americans were licentious, the far greater frequency of divorce there being blamed on an excess of female independence. ... Canadians...took for granted that they were morally superior.”<sup>7</sup>

Mickelthwait and Wooldridge argue that the current global trend is shifting toward the US model of religion based on choice rather than state decree. Yes, this can be both fascinating and bizarre. As Peter Berger once pointed out, “foreigners see America as the land of the Puritans and pornographers.”<sup>8</sup> Consider that California contains both Silicon Valley and some of the biggest churches in the world. “The dialectic that has dominated American culture for so long – between the siren voices of capitalism and the reassuring force of religion – is going global.”<sup>9</sup>

Around the world people are choosing their faith rather than living with the religion they were born with, and they have more religion (or non-religion) to choose from. This, Mickelthwait and Wooldridge say, is going to profoundly affect public life. “The more that people choose their religion, rather than just inherit it, the more likely they are to make a noise about it.”<sup>10</sup>

I suppose that can be seen as a frightening prospect. We’ve already seen extreme religious politics taking hold in the US. You can tell me whether you feel there are politically religious shifts happening here in Canada. If we value democracy, we may have to accept that we cannot stop people from organizing together based on their religious principles – even if we find those principles to be objectionable. From what I can see, using law to constrict people’s religious expression backfires. If anything, religious extremist movements around the world are showing that the cost of exclusion may be higher than the cost of inclusion.

Let me give you an example that may seem mundane to some and extreme to others. For many years now, I have been exploring the issue of Muslim women and the veil. While in seminary, I had the opportunity to study with a group of Muslim feminists, and I have had the joy of getting to know Muslim women in Montreal who are equally radical. No, Muslim feminism is not an oxymoron. Throughout the Muslim world, there are feminist scholars who are reinterpreting the Qur’an, in the same way that feminist Christians and Jews have reinterpreted the Bible. Just as our foremothers and forefathers read the Bible for

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Gwyn, *John A. The Man Who Made Us; The Life and Time of John A. Macdonald. Volume One: 1815-1867*, Random House Canada, 2007, p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> Mickelthwait and Wooldridge, p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

themselves and discovered that they could find no evidence of the Trinity, these are women who are striving to demonstrate that the oppressive claims upon their lives do not come from scripture. Among my fellow students, some wore the hijab – the headscarf – and others did not. In each case, it was a matter of choice, and each woman respected the other's decision.

In the days that I studied with these women, our professor Leila Ahmed would often speak of the non-Muslim Western “obsession with the veil.” In the post-9/11 world, the headscarf, a simple piece of cloth, had come to be a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women. I heard this in the States, and I've heard it since I've been in Canada (and I am talking about the hijab, not the niqab that fully covers the body and face). There is an instant assumption that men are dictating what these women must wear. The Muslim women I know tell me that there are different interpretations of what the Qur'an says about women covering themselves. Some say that the custom comes from tribal tradition, and not from scripture. Others say that this is a way for them to express their faith. As one Canadian friend told me, she felt she had to publicly wear her hijab after 9/11 to make it clear to the world that she was a Muslim and that the majority of Muslims were peace-loving people.

It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the veil came to have political significance when it was appropriated by British colonizers as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression in order to justify a distinction between the “civilized” British way of doing things as compared to the “backward” ways of local customs. (These were the same men who were openly opposing women's suffrage back home in England.) The colonizers, and those who supported a Westernizing agenda, saw the lifting of the veil as the means for “civilizing” women and Islam. Thus, the veil became loaded with political meaning, which continues to this day.

For many Muslims, the lifting of the veil became a symbol of imported Western ideas, while the wearing of the veil became a symbol of anti-imperialism. We may think that by banning the veil we will be helping to liberate Muslim women, but that is a presumption on our part. In practice, the more Western societies make the veil an issue, the more Muslim women come to see it as an act of self-definition against a state that is trying to limit their personal expression. This is not to say that Muslim women don't experience oppression. Islam is as varied as Christianity in the way that it is practiced and is equally shaped by local culture and family interaction. Granted, the hijab may be common enough on our streets these days that we are getting used to it. Now our concerns turn more toward the niqab worn by a much smaller minority of women. The point is that we make a grave mistake when we see any religious tradition as a single monolithic expression. We have to let go of our assumptions and let others speak for themselves, without letting go of our dedication to human rights.

We are looking at a world that is becoming increasingly religiously complex. Within Western culture, there is no single idea around which our lives revolve. We are struggling with an ideology that sees religion as separate from the rest of our lives, and we are encountering whole groups of people for whom all life is religion. Within our own congregations we are facing increasing complexity as well. We have people who have lived

through the darkest days and are fleeing the repressiveness of their past religious experiences. Some want to hold onto elements of their former traditions, while others want to wash their hands of anything that even slightly hints at religiosity. At the same time, we have people coming to our doors who are seeking deeper spirituality. They too are responding to the shifting times.

People have always needed myths, reflects Karen Armstrong in her last book, *The Case for God*. *Logos*, or reason, helps us to understand the practical world, but *mythos*, or myth, is what helps us to deal with our longings, our suffering and the unanswerable questions about life and death. But myths needed rituals in order to integrate their meaning into the actions of lived human experience. You have “to engage with a symbol imaginatively, become ritually and ethically involved with it and allow it to effect profound change in you...”<sup>11</sup> In ancient times, people knew how to do this. They knew that myths were more than beliefs. They were a programme of action, and it was up to the individual to make myth a reality in daily life. Religion became a way of acting on myth, to address the deeper longing that reason could not touch. “Religion, therefore, was not primarily something that people thought but something they did.”<sup>12</sup>

The problem in our Western culture today, Armstrong argues, is that we see religion as doctrine, as something people think rather than do. There’s no room for a dynamic interaction with myth. Either you accept a religion whole cloth or you don’t. We have let religion become untied from its moorings. We’ve come to see faith too simplistically. We let ourselves see things in black and white, relying on our childhood views of God to shape the adult conversation.

There is a danger when we simplify our positions too much. I am not comfortable with religious groups whose dogma becomes an excuse for the oppressive treatment or exclusion of others. But I feel equal sadness when I listen to the new atheists. Karen Armstrong articulates it for me perfectly when she writes, “The new atheists have a disturbing lack of understanding or concern about the complexity and ambiguity of modern experience...[their] polemic entirely fails to mention the concern for justice and compassion that, despite their undeniable failings, has been espoused by all three of the monotheisms.”<sup>13</sup> The new atheists show a “lack of concern for the poverty, injustice and humiliation that has inspired many of the atrocities they deplore, they show no yearning for a better world. [Unlike] Nietzsche, Sartre or Camus, [they do not] compel the readers to face up to the pointlessness and futility that ensue when people lack the means of creating a sense of meaning. They do not appear to consider the effect of such nihilism on people who do not have privileged lives and absorbing work.”

I think within Unitarianism we have come to mirror the dichotomy that is getting played out in the external world. We have had a tendency to divide ourselves into camps: those

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<sup>11</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York/Toronto 2009, p. 321.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 307.

who want us to become a non-religion, and those who are seeking faith. This can be our greatest curse or our greatest blessing. I like to see it as a blessing. We need to move beyond the polarity of the debate, and I believe we can. We need to become more sophisticated in our understanding of religion, not just leaving room for a variety of belief, but cherishing its existence and affirming that it is a human strength to hunger for meaning in our lives. The more we listen to each other's stories, the more we will be able to engage with others outside our walls. There is a danger when we make assumptions about other people's values without taking the time to ask and to listen to what they really mean.

As a child I went from certainty to certainty, from an absolute belief that God existed to being convinced beyond a doubt there was no God. I lived in a world where so many words were taboo. When I became a Unitarian Universalist, I rejoiced in the freedom to shape my own faith, to quench my spiritual thirst and to let my religious curiosity blossom. I have always seen this faith we share as an opening into something greater.

As Unitarian Universalists we have to be willing to boldly step into the middle of the culture wars. What if we offered a place for the really difficult conversations? What if we brought together members of different faith groups to discuss abortion, or gay rights, or women's rights? Maybe we've already done this in the past, but I'm suggesting we go beyond intellectual conversations. I'm thinking about engaging people in telling their own stories and the myths that speak to their hearts.

I have no doubt this will be very painful to many of us, because it may mean engaging with people who speak from their hearts to say that women must be subservient to men and that gays are doomed to eternal damnation. Doug Muder, writing for the *UU World*, once described this as the challenging divide between people who live a commanded life and those who live a committed life.<sup>14</sup> Most religious conservatives live according to commandments. Theirs is a commanded life that revolves around obligations rather than choices. Expectations are clear, but to step outside of the network of obligations is inconceivable. In contrast, liberals tend to believe in living committed lives where each individual has the right and responsibility to choose the roles they play and the people they love. But as the global economy changes, all of us are forced to renegotiate our roles. Whether our worldview is commanded or committed, we may have more in common than we realize as we respond to many of the same sources of alienation and pain.

Perhaps we will find common ground, not within the narrowly defined spaces where we agree, but at the points of intersection of our shared suffering. There is more that we can learn from each other about what lifts us out of the ordinary – if we can move away from a purely intellectual engagement with each other. I believe this is the path to take, even when it comes to the harshest issues that divide us. This is where we will be called to engage with each other in the public square.

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<sup>14</sup> Doug Muder, "Who's Afraid of Freedom and Tolerance?" *UU World*, Fall 2005.

Karen Armstrong writes, “We badly need to consider the nature of religion and discover where and how it goes wrong.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, she advises, if our dialogue is to lead to creative insight, we must have compassion for each other’s humanity – no matter where we stand on the theological spectrum. From my perspective, that means cultivating greater humility. Sometimes we stand in our Unitarian fortresses and congratulate each other that we are wiser and superior to the misguided creatures outside our doors. I’d like to see us open those doors wide to take the risk that we might actually learn something beyond our comfortably sheltering walls. In a world where the battle lines are being drawn between the religious and the non-religious, may the principles we hold dear enable us to be mediators, rather than convince ourselves that we must choose sides.

To do this, we will need to become more theologically literate. I am not arguing that anyone needs to adopt a new theology. Whether you are atheist, agnostic, deist, theist, pantheist, undecided, whatever you call yourself, take the time to become more thoughtful about your own beliefs and the beliefs of others. Try to broaden your understanding of what it means to choose to live in a world of ideas or to choose to live an all-encompassing faith. Try to discover the ideological lenses that inform your perspective. To do so does not mean you will be stepping over into the dark side. It is to shed light in a complex world that is going to need more and more people who are capable of seeing between the shadows and the brightness. Break it open. Don’t be afraid to test out new words and new ideas within your congregations. Stop censoring yourselves, and stop censoring each other. Don’t be afraid to speak and tell your story from the depth of your heart.

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<sup>15</sup> Armstrong, p. 323.