

Skeptical Yet Spiritual

By Michael A. Schuler

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Gleanings from the Free Religious Tradition

From Frederick May Eliot*

Most outsiders apparently believe that Unitarians are always, under all circumstances, opposed to anything that can be called traditional. They assume that when a Unitarian runs into a tradition, he will automatically be “agin’ it....” Yet a good case can be made for the proposition that Unitarians are more concerned to maintain traditions than their critics are.

It makes all the difference in the world what *kind* of tradition you are talking about. There is a tradition of nonconformity, for example, that Unitarians will defend to the limit.... There is a tradition of respect for the mind that Unitarians accept and try hard to live by; a tradition of reverent appreciation for the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth that [is undogmatic and carries little theological baggage]; a tradition of honest thinking and plain speech that goes back for centuries before the Christian era; a tradition of sound scholarship ... that is hoary with age but perennially young in its rigorous requirements; a tradition of outspoken prophecy that is as modern as (Martin Luther King) and as ancient as Amos. Pick the right set of traditions, and Unitarians are as observant as any so-called “traditionalist” you can name.

The test is the effect that a tradition has upon men’s and women’s minds and hearts. Is it a narrowing tradition—meager, negative, dwarfing, paralyzing? Then let it be set aside!

Or is it, on the other hand, enlarging, giving new power, new insights, wider sympathies, a broader tolerance and deeper mutual respect? Then let it stand and grow! There are traditions that lead to destruction and decay, and there are others that lead to life and growth. That was the test that Jesus used and commended. It is still the best. Unitarians try to apply it intelligently and faithfully, and the traditions that meet it successfully are held in high esteem.

Perhaps the best way to put it is that Unitarians are critical traditionalists, very much in the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth....

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Reflections

Around nine hundred years ago, as Western Europe was emerging from the so-called Dark Ages, and a new generation of Christian scholars was becoming reacquainted with the works of the ancient Greek philosophers, a fierce debate unfolded.

A priest by the name of Peter Abelard was, by the reckoning of most of his medieval peers, perhaps the most cogent and controversial thinker of this deeply religious age. A celebrated teacher at the University of Paris, he was also a master of debate—a man whose passion for truth caused him to delve into the most delicate of theological subjects.

Early in his career, Abelard composed a book entitled *Sic et Non*—which translated into English simply means “Yes and No.” The work was essentially a catalogue of statements made by early Fathers of the Roman Catholic Church on a variety of religious topics. The purpose of the book was to highlight the disagreements that frequently arose between and among those celebrated figures, and to expose the lack of harmony in their opinions. Abelard wrote this book not to discredit his distinguished predecessors or to overthrow the Church’s sacred doctrines. His objective was to improve the quality of students’ thinking. *Sic et Non* was designed as a teaching tool to give young theologians practice in *resolving* difficult theological problems.

Abelard’s critics didn’t see it quite that way, however, and they were scandalized by his methodology. For them, it was unthinkable that the august writings of these respected authorities would be assigned as “homework” and subjected to the immature judgment of a class of students.

Nor was that all. Later in his tumultuous career, Peter Abelard published a highly original essay on the doctrine of the Trinity, and that provoked an even louder uproar. According to his opponents, the Trinity was too sublime a subject for academic discussion. Abelard was faulted not only for some of his unorthodox *ideas*, but for his apparent lack of piety and intellectual hubris.

Abelard’s principle critic and, eventually, his persecutor was an ultra-orthodox monk by the name of Bernard of Clairvaux, whom one commentator describes as a “bitter-end traditionalist.” Abelard, he admonished, had “defiled the church.”

Complaining to one of his friends in the Catholic hierarchy Bernard wrote:

He has infected with his own blight the minds of simple people. He tries to explore with reason what the devout mind grasps at once with a vigorous faith. Faith believes, it does not dispute. But this man, apparently holding God suspect, will not believe anything until he has first examined it with his reason.

Answering his detractors, Abelard had this to say about his scholarly pursuits:

The most brilliant of philosophers, Aristotle, encouraged his students to undertake the task of truth-seeking with every ounce of their curiosity. For by doubting, we come to inquire, and by inquiring we perceive the truth.

In the end, and despite repeated professions of Catholic loyalty and Christian faith, Peter Abelard was stripped of his teaching position and required to destroy the books that he had written. Bernard of Clairvaux won the day, was eventually canonized and joined the company of the Church's most celebrated saints.

This was hardly the first time preeminent Christian thinkers were divided over the issue of faith and doubt and how freely individuals would be permitted to critique church dogma. In the early church and before attitudes had hardened, practically any issue was discussable. Then came the imposition in the 4th century of the great creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople. Now certain questions were routinely disallowed, and good Christians were admonished simply to obey and believe.

With the discrediting of Abelard in the 12th century that precedent was once again reaffirmed, and faith got the nod over skepticism. The decision was so decisive, in fact, that even today most Christians equate spirituality *with* faith, by which they mean *suspension* of critical judgment, *surrender* to the authority of Scripture, and deference to scripture's official interpreters. Thus, spirituality and skepticism are thought, by most Christians, to be incommensurate. To be *devout*, as Bernard reminds us, is not to *doubt*.

One major reason I am a Unitarian Universalist is because, for as long as I can remember, Peter Abelard's argument has always been more persuasive to me than Bernard of Clairvaux's. I was brought up in a household where religious proposi-

tions were subjected to close scrutiny and idols routinely overthrown. My early environment, then, predisposed me in this direction.

But individual *temperament* also has something to do with my preferences. Temperamentally, I seem to possess an abnormally high tolerance for ambiguity, am reasonably comfortable with "not knowing," and enjoy being "on a spiritual path" with no predetermined or anticipated final destination. I have a sibling on the other hand, close to me in age, who would find Bernard's position far more congenial than Abelard's. Raised in the same religiously permissive environment, we ended up at opposite ends of the theological spectrum.

My own sentiments are aptly captured in this passage by the late Unitarian minister Robert Weston:

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth. . . . A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief. Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false.

I especially like the word Weston chose to begin this passage—the word "cherish." It suggests something that is not just pragmatic, but truly precious—a *value* that informs our understanding of spiritual practice and our approach to spiritual living. So, don't let anyone make you feel bad, or guilty, about your doubts. They are an essential part of who we are and what we aspire to be as religious people. There is a wonderful Zen Buddhist aphorism that expresses the same notion in a succinct and powerful way:

Great doubt, great awakening; little doubt, little awakening; no doubt, no awakening.

Most religious traditions with which I am familiar are more receptive to doubt and skepticism than Christianity. Take Judaism, for instance. That brutally honest debate over unmerited evil and the apparent absence of divine justice that unfolds in the Old Testament book of Job is a classic example of religiously-sanctioned doubt. The inclusion of this particular book in the Jewish canon demonstrates Judaism's willingness to tackle even the ten-

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derest of religious topics; in this case, “is God truly just or is he merely capricious?” As far as I know, Judaism has never burned or tortured anyone for asking impertinent questions.

The great Eastern religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism—have demonstrated a similar tolerance for doubt, dissent, and innovation. Furthermore, until the 20th century, Islam permitted a comparable degree of latitude. These are the words of Ibn al-Arabi, a Muslim theologian and mystic who was beginning to make a name for himself at about the same time Peter Abelard was falling out of favor with his Christian superiors.

Do not attach yourself to any particular creed exclusively (Ibn al-Arabi wrote), so that you may disbelieve all the rest; otherwise, you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter.”

Despite the recent growth of fundamentalism in the Muslim world, in many circles the open-minded Ibn al-Arabi remains a much revered figure.

The point is, in most times and in most cultures, doubt and skepticism have not been viewed negatively or labeled as hazardous to one’s spiritual health. That is because other religions, as a rule, have been less preoccupied with “belief” than Western Christianity. Contemplative practice, self-knowledge, virtuous conduct, compassionate service—these have been much more central to non-Christian traditions than passive submission to official doctrine.

Not that Christianity hasn’t had its own share of critical thinkers and nay-sayers—questioning spirits who simply refused to be quieted. I think, for instance of Karen Armstrong, author of *A History of God*, *The Great Transformation* and a number of other influential books.

In her autobiography, Armstrong candidly discusses her experience as a young nun in a British convent. Her superiors told her repeatedly *not* to question, simply to believe. “You are a literal-minded blockhead,” the Mother Superior replied when Karen had the temerity to question any aspect of her indoctrination.

I was just trying to make sense of a senseless

system ... (she writes) and for a time learned to stamp hard on my mind whenever it reached out toward the truth.

Ultimately Armstrong was unable to reconcile the demands of her religious order with the yearnings of her inquiring mind, and she left both the convent *and* the Roman Catholic Church. At that point she had become convinced that, in her words:

too much certainty made people heartless and cruel, closed their minds to new possibilities, made them complacent and pleased with themselves.

For a time after her departure, Armstrong felt she had completely lost not only her Catholic, but her spiritual identity. Without that reliable anchor of “belief” she felt uncertain about her convictions and unrelated to anything greater than herself. It was only when she concluded that unwavering conviction was *not* a precondition for spirituality, and came to understand that the constant *dance* of doubt with belief is what grows our spirits, that she began to feel more secure and purposeful.

At this point I hope you’ll agree that skepticism is, in fact, a spiritual virtue and not a vice. So now let’s take this inquiry a step further. If unconditional adherence to the tenets of religion isn’t required, what are the hallmarks of a mature and honest spirituality?

We can begin with a qualification about skepticism itself. While it may be necessary, it is not sufficient. Doubt and skepticism can serve as a useful acid, eating away the false. But when that has been done, what sort of precious ore is left behind?

According to Robert Solomon, a professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, a skeptical spirituality does not end up as a catalogue of pale negations—it is not hollow and does not lack charm. Once released from the cramped prison of sectarian dogma, our spirituality is finally able to take flight. With a receptive, expectant and positive attitude, Solomon insists, “all sorts of possibilities open up that might never have been evident before.”

In the philosopher’s opinion, spirituality is less about abstract theological notions than the “grand and thoughtful passions of life ... a life lived in accordance with those grand thoughts and passions.”

Now, when Solomon refers to the passions, he’s not talking about passing “moods” or violent obsessions. Certain passions “sweep us away” and seem beyond our control—one thinks of the emotional

outbursts characteristic of Pentecostal or charismatic worship services. Solomon finds nothing commendable in such collective hysteria.

The passions he extols are love, reverence, and trust. These, he insists, can be cultivated, are very much in our control, and can become the source of our greatest satisfaction.

Love is an outlook, a disposition or an attitude toward existence more than it is an emotion. A lover embraces and enthusiastically says “yes” to life. And, fully cognizant of its unpleasant and tragic aspects, he or she still chooses to regard the world as something not only useful but intriguing, not only beautiful but sublime.

But love is not enough. Left to itself, without the element of reverence, love tends to become possessive and controlling. Reverence compliments but in no way compromises our love, Solomon says. It gives us the ability to step back and let the object of our love be who they are. Reverence lets the world be what it is without undue attachment or undue interference. It is all about setting limits, cultivating humility, and being in “right relationship” with that which we profess to love.

Then there is trust which, in Solomon’s analysis, is nothing like the naïve confidence some people have in God’s willingness to answer their prayers or save their souls. “All too often, he writes, “spirituality is identified with blind trust, the trust of a child or a fanatic.”

The sort of trust Solomon recommends has less to do with cosmic guarantees that our personal needs will be met and our interests served, than with maintaining a positive, but ultimately a realistic relationship with the world.

“Authentic trust,” the philosopher writes, “is trust reflected upon, its risks and vulnerabilities understood, trust held in balance.” In full recognition of life’s vicissitudes and our own limitations, we yet choose to be loving and reverent in our relationships.

When we are passionately committed to these three values, and thoughtfully endeavor to live by them—when we “care about the right things,” in other words—we will feel better about ourselves,

more hopeful about the future and more compassionate toward others.

What, then, is the real enemy of spirituality? Clearly it is not skepticism, doubt, or disbelief. What sullies our religious sentiments and diminishes our capacity for love, reverence, and trust are those familiar egoistic vices of envy, resentment, vanity, self-righteousness, exclusivity, and vengefulness. Negative passions that, regrettably, have become all too prevalent in contemporary culture.

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To be spiritual in this day and age is to be radically counter-cultural. Should we choose to embark upon it, the spiritual path Solomon describes will almost certainly require both fortitude and patience. But then again, the path of the determined spiritual skeptic has never been easy. Over seventeen hundred years ago, the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius declared that it undoubtedly takes more effort and greater determination to live well as a doubter than as a believer. That’s not to say that the path is meant to be an unpleasant one, for as our understanding of these hard issues increases and our confidence grows, so does our satisfaction and our joy. Karen Armstrong would attest to that, and so do I.

One final thought: Although the word “skeptical” has been invoked throughout this sermon, it’s important to remember that its value is largely instrumental. In other words, skepticism is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It remains a spiritual asset only when respectfully and conscientiously applied—with due humility, in other words.

As disciplined, loving spiritual seekers, we use skepticism to test our own convictions, not gleefully to poke holes in the beliefs of others. By combining these two terms—skeptical and spiritual—I hope to have described an individual whose heart is every bit as open as his mind.