

The Growth of “No Religious Affiliation”
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Roger Fritts
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda Maryland

It was a beautiful spring morning as the family drove into the parking lot of the Unitarian Universalist church. They drove around looking for a place to park until finally they spotted an empty space marked “Reserved for Visitors on Sunday Morning.” They sat in their car for a few minutes looking at the grounds of the church, watching the squirrels, the birds and the people.

They had found the church by typing the word “Unitarian” into an Internet search engine. This had taken them to the Unitarian Universalist Association Web page, where they had typed their zip code. Up came the Web address for a church on Cedar Lane. They clicked on the link and browsed through the church Web page. They read the church newsletter, read about activities of the church and read several sermons by the ministers. All this stimulated their curiosity, yet they were still uncertain.

She had attended a Catholic church as a child, and he had grown up as a Methodist. By the time they met as students at the University of Maryland they had both stopped attending church. They felt that the creeds and rituals no longer held meaning for them; they were not relevant to their search for the meaning in life. They agreed that established religion had little to offer. Neither of them had attended a Sunday worship service for eight years. When asked on the telephone by a poll taker about their religion, they stated that they had “No Religious Affiliation.” They were part of a fast-growing category. In 1990, eight percent of Americans answered “No Religious Affiliation.” By 2008, that number doubled to 16 percent. (American Religious Identification Survey Summary Report. March 2009)

However, for this young couple things have changed in the past few months. A close friend from college had suddenly become seriously ill. For a few weeks, it looked as though the friend was going to die. Now she was slowly getting better, but her serious illness had caused the couple to reexamine their lives. What was that all about? When you took away the Prius, the meals in sushi restaurants and the evening watching college basketball on television, what did it all mean?

The church’s Web site suggested a church that emphasized personal experience, not orthodox doctrine. It suggested a church that encouraged people to think for themselves. It suggested a church that celebrated the diversity of beliefs, not a church that enforced conformity.

Their two children were reaching the age when they were beginning to ask questions about religion.

This fact, along with their own questions, motivated them to visit the church on Sunday morning.

By the time they got out of their car and walked through the doors, found the administrators' table in the lower level of the church, found the children's religious education classes and then came back upstairs, they were late for the beginning of the 11:00 a.m. service. Still, they were not alone. Several others stood in the back of the church (perhaps hoping to miss the offering). Standing in the back, they did not raise a hand when the minister asked if any visitors would like to get a free pin. After the first hymn, the visiting couple found a seat in the back of the auditorium.

The experience was both interesting and confusing. The singing of the choir was wonderful, but someone had changed the words of the hymns. The liturgy was printed in the order of service, but it did not include Bible readings. The ministers did not wear robes, and instead of saying "You should believe this," they said, "I believe this," speaking only for themselves.

The husband was struck by the fact that the order of service invited them to eat a doughnut and attend a Jewish Seder. The wife was interested to hear that some in the congregation were going down to the mall for a political demonstration after the worship service.

After the service, they collected their children and drove home assessing the experience. The children had a positive experience, saying that the teachers and the other children had been friendly. The parents liked the fact that the worship service did not play on guilt or fear.

In the following weeks, the family explored the religion. They were fascinated to discover that both Unitarianism and Universalism are several hundred years old, with roots in the Reformation in Europe. They were pleased to learn that the church was democratic in organization, that meetings were open and that decisions were made by majority vote. They were amazed to discover that four United States presidents had been active members of Unitarian congregations.

In many ways they felt comfortable with the church on Cedar Lane. Yet in spite of their positive feelings, they did not sign the membership book.

One day, a few months after they began attending church, the couple appeared in the office of one of the ministers. A bit sheepish, they wanted to discuss their reluctance to join. The minister listened.

We enjoy the church. We have learned a great deal. It is a good thing in our lives. Nevertheless, we still find ourselves holding back. . . . It has something to do with all the freedom and individuality. People argue about everything . . . some support Republicans and some support Democrats, some believe in God and some are atheists, some are capitalists and some are socialists. One person says

he is a Buddhist Unitarian and another person says she is a follower of Edgar Casey. Some love your sermons and some stay away from the sermon and go to the forum or just read a newspaper on the lower level. How can you tolerate every point of view, every opinion and every theology? How can people be allowed to do their own thing?

We like the church . . . but we find it unsettling. No one can agree on religious terminology, on the worship experience or on what to teach. We sought out your church because we felt emptiness in our lives around religion. Many of our needs have been met here, sometimes in unexpected ways. Yet it is hard to feel spiritual when people do not agree on what it means to be spiritual.

The minister appreciated their candor and tried to respond in kind. He said:

I, too, have experienced the feeling of imperfection you are describing. When I choose not to be part of a conservative church, I leave behind the religion of final statements about life and the universe. I lose the security of a completely mapped-out world. Conservative religion has standards of truth and falsity derived from scriptures or the teaching of priests or ministers. Traditional religion tells us what is right and what is wrong. It promises us security and freedom from doubt.

The alternative that more and more people choose is to have no religious affiliation. This also tempts me. I am tempted to leave the ministry and find Monday through Friday work, so that on Sunday morning I can sleep in. I am tempted to look at the world and I ask how it can entertain me, how it can give me pleasure. Clever people are constantly inventing new toys that I find tempting, computer games, movies on demand, new restaurants, new amusement parks and new places to travel. Such activities can distract me and help me avoid thinking about pain or death or the suffering of other people. Absorbed in my amusements, I can avoid potentially stressful thoughts about ethics and morality. "No Religious Affiliation" is tempting, especially when I have money and when I am healthy.

Liberal religion, Unitarian Universalism offers a third alternative.

To traditional conservative religion, we say, human existence cannot be coerced into conformity with any rigid theology. We do not know, and we will never know everything there is to discover of the meaning and purpose of life; therefore, we are open to new knowledge and new experience.

To those who have "No Religious Affiliation" we say: Although we do not have final answers about life, we know that we need to be a part of a religious community where we treat each other with care, respect, responsibility, understanding and dignity. When we become too absorbed with amusements, or power, or money, or status, we cannot love others or ourselves. When we focus on our own ambitions and pleasures, we lose the capacity to be concerned about others. The security

of self-absorption is, in the end, a false security.

The minister looked directly at the couple sitting before him. “*Sometimes,*” he said,

I am tempted to join a more traditional religion that says it has all the answers. Sometimes I am tempted to give up religion altogether and sleep in on Sunday morning. However, 99 percent of the times I feel at home here, as part of a religious community where each person gets to decide for themselves what each believes about God, spirituality and the purpose of human life. Here I can stand firm in my belief that all claims to truth must be tested by logic and reason. Here each person has the right to explore religion while being treated with dignity and respect.

The meeting was over. The couple walked to their car. Once again, they experienced the confusion of relating to this strange institution. Sitting in their car in the church parking lot, they talked together:

They liked the religious education classes and the teachers who taught their children. They liked the people they met at coffee hour. In many ways, they felt as though they had found a home. They had shaken off the guilt of their childhood religion by finding a church without fear and judgment. They had developed their skills in personal relations by attending small groups within the congregation. They made many friends with similar interests and found themselves becoming less isolated in the community. They asked themselves:

Next time a poll taker calls and asks us about our religion, what will we answer? Will we say that we have “No Religious Affiliation?” Or are we really willing to make the commitment to join this church? Can we live in a gathering of diverse people, where folks respect each other even when they disagree? Can we raise our children in a religious community that admits it does not have all the answers? Are we ready to be members of this congregation?

Both caught up in their own thoughts, they started up the car. They turned the corner out of the parking lot and joined the rush of traffic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: Some ideas in this sermon come from “Walking the Narrow Ridge,” by Jacob Trapp at the Unitarian Church in Summit, New Jersey, May 21, 1961. The idea of describing the church from the point of view of newcomers I got from a sermon called “The Limits of Toleration,” by David Rankin at the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco, October 22, 1978.