"PARTY LIKE IT'S 1799: FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER AND TODAY'S CULTURED DESPISERS OF RELIGION"
A paper for Prairie Group
Roger Bertschausen
November 2014

Part One—The Rise of the Nones: Promise or Peril for Unitarian Universalism?
A British Unitarian woman in her late fifties—young by the standards of British Unitarianism—silently cleans the pews in her church. She found Unitarianism as a young adult and it fit her well. She's come faithfully ever since. The consistency of her devotion can be seen in the many small tasks she does for her church, like cleaning the pews once a month. The dirt that she cleans every month mostly comes from dust in the old building, not use. The average Sunday attendance of her church is between five and eight people.

Once a year, she takes what feels like a ridiculous leap of faith: she ventures up into the balcony and dusts the pews there. With five to eight people coming each Sunday, they really don't make much use of the balcony these days. The woman guesses that the last time the church used the balcony was before World War One. Her cleaning the balcony pews is an act of remarkable witness and hope, or foolishness. As she cleans the balcony pews, she visualizes what her church might feel like if it was full. Then the next Sunday, she sits with the handful that shows up and realizes again that they are an awful long way from needing the balcony pews.[1]

The most astonishing religious trend in the United States over the last couple decades is the rise of the Nones. The Nones are folks who say "none of the above" when they're asked for their religious affiliation. Increasingly, they are responding with "None at all!" They are not affiliated with any religion, and are mostly not looking to affiliate. They simply don't believe—in Religion (with a capital R) or in any particular religion (small r). Mainline Christian, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist: these faiths have all gone down numerically, either precipitously (Presbyterians for example) or a bit (Unitarian Universalists). Catholics have stayed about the same, thanks to an influx of immigrants replacing the droves of Catholics who have abandoned the faith. The fact that one in ten Americans is a former Catholic says something about the size of the exodus that immigrants offset. Meanwhile, just in the past five years, Nones have grown from fifteen to nearly twenty percent of the U.S. population. One third of young adults under thirty are Nones.[2]

Some American Unitarian Universalists have been salivating at the prospect of more and more Nones in our society. With our lack of dogma and our emphasis on freedom, Unitarian Universalism is just the place for the Nones to turn. Right?

---

[1] A Unitarian woman I met shared with me her experience cleaning the pews in her church.

[2] http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/.

I used to think this was true, that the dawning of a secular age would usher in a glorious period for Unitarian Universalism. But then I spent my sabbatical last fall in the UK. I saw what a secularized future might look like, and it was not a pretty picture for our Unitarian brothers and sisters there.

The Unitarian Church is doing just as badly in the UK as everyone else. Nationwide in the UK there's something like three thousand Unitarians—or about as many as there are in my congregation in Appleton and the two other largest congregations in Wisconsin. Three thousand in the whole country of sixty-four million! If we had the same per capita number of Unitarian Universalists in the United States, there would be around 15,000 of us. In the UK there are 160 congregations, many or most of which, like the church where the faithful woman cleans the balcony pews once a year, draw under ten people to their weekly services. One person high up in the nationwide Unitarian leadership told me there will be well under a hundred congregations ten years from now—and the hemorrhaging won't stop there. If there was an official list of "endangered" faith communities, the Unitarian Church in the UK would surely be on that list.

The UK is a hard place to do church. I had no idea how hard it was before I went there. Going to church in the UK is positively counter-cultural. It takes courage. Most non-church people I encountered in the UK seem to view going to church as quaint, irrelevant, ridiculous, or even downright evil. Most people in the little Unitarian church I served on my sabbatical were embarrassed to tell family and friends they went to church. Religiously, they live in the closet. Religion in the UK is not despised and hated as much as it is ignored and, when it is rarely paid attention, pitied. It has been rendered marginal and irrelevant. This is worse than being despised.

I've seen estimates that six percent of the British population goes to church regularly. I'd guess in London it's even lower. Six percent!

I asked a lot of people I met why they think the UK has become such an overwhelmingly secular society. I learned that the decline of religion has its roots primarily in the early twentieth century. Two things happened that doomed religion. The first was the fracture that developed between religion and science, with too many churches taking ridiculous stands against scientific ideas like Darwin's theory of evolution. The First World War was the second, probably more important development. It wasn't just millions of men who died on those fields of poppies, but also the idea that there is some sort of God calling the shots, directly or indirectly. How could a God preside over such meaningless slaughter?

We had the science/religion fracture in the United States, too, but we didn't experience nearly the degree of death and destruction in World War I. That is one big reason why we didn't have a similar free-fall of religion in the twentieth century. One out of fifty people in the UK was killed in World War I. In the U.S., we lost one out of a thousand people. Most everyone in the UK knew several soldiers who died in the war; in the U.S., most people didn't know anyone

personally who was killed. So maybe it's not surprising that World War I is all but forgotten in the U.S. today. Its impact on families and towns faded relatively quickly, especially compared to the carnage that came before in the Civil War and the heavier casualty rate to follow in World War II.

The impact of World War I on British families was magnified by the military units being organized geographically. When I visited the Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel in London, the minister showed me a plaque on the altar listing church members killed in the great wars. The World War I list was much longer than the World War II casualty list. Pointing to the World War I list, the minister said, "Here's the thing: most of them died on the same day." They were in the same unit, a unit that was decimated in a particular battle on a particular day. Think of the impact on your congregation if you lost eight young people in one day to war. Think of the impact on smaller towns in the UK where lives were more intimately intertwined than in the metropolis of London.

Our nation's tribute to our military veterans—Veterans Day—takes place on November 11th, the same day as Remembrance Day in the UK. This day commemorates the armistice that ended World War I. If you asked, many Americans would probably have no idea why Veterans Day is observed on that day. In the UK, the searing collective memory of World War I is always viscerally right under the surface. It comes above the surface in a grand scale on Remembrance Day. The UK got hammered in World War II, but it's World War I that is most talked about. The carnage of World War II was kind of an afterthought, the exclamation point to the traumatic slaughter of World War I.

In Friedrich Schleiermacher's widely read book published in 1799, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, he argues that true religion is rooted in feeling and experiences, not in theology or ideas or actions. Schleiermacher's provocative thesis suggests another possible reason why the British Unitarian church has declined so precipitously: the banishment of feeling and experience in church.

In "Affect Theology: A Roadmap for the Continental Gathering of Unitarian Universalist Seminarians," Thandeka writes about the impact of the banishment of feeling and experience on Unitarian Universalist and other liberal ministers and congregations in the United States:

> Ministers thus learned how to sideline the heart of their own faith in order to focus their minds on the nature and structure of religious beliefs and doctrines...The heart of the liberal faith froze.[3]

I suspect this also happened in British Unitarianism. Ideas and ethics are not enough if the soul fails to be stirred, if the affect—which Thandeka elsewhere defines as "the purely physical,

---

[3] Thandeka, pp. 1-2.

emotively empirical, organic condition of a person's spiritual life"[4]—of ministers and congregants fails to be engaged. Layer on top of this a war-inspired crisis of faith and the battle between science and (some) religion and voila: religion's free fall to near oblivion begins.

Has this perfect storm come to the United States now? The rise of the Nones and secularism suggests that it might have.

Why have the Nones risen at such a shocking rate in the United States these last couple of decades—especially since 2001? Maybe some of this can be traced back to the American reaction to 9/11. While it's presumptuous to compare the American experience of 9/11 to the British experience of World War I—a few thousand dead versus nearly a million--for whatever reason the impact of these events on religion seems comparable. With the contemporary media, 9/11 brought mayhem into Americans' lives and imaginations in a compelling way even if we didn't know anyone killed in the attacks. And the years since have had some of the tumult and radical dis-ease of the Great War and the disastrous flu pandemic that followed.

We Unitarian Universalists may now have all the ingredients present for the UK Unitarians in the early twentieth century: the continued assault by some religious people on science; the banishment of feeling and, while we're at it, the body in too many of our congregations; and now, 9/11-triggered angst and a dramatic increase of people who are simply done with religion. Thandeka suggests that the frozen heart of too many of our congregations prevents our faith from growing.[5] Combine the frozen heart with the continued war on science from some religions, 9/11, and a failure to grow will be the least of our problems. Dying will be our problem.

Our Unitarian Universalist population, slightly rising for a few decades, has now taken a downward turn. Will that soon turn into a nosedive? If I live for forty more years, will I come back to my congregation in Appleton at the age of 91 and find some dedicated member faithfully cleaning the chairs, most of which haven't been sat in for decades, in the hopes that they one day will again be occupied?

We are feeling the impact of this spike in secularism even in Appleton, a small, conservative city in America's heartland. Many of the humanists and atheists who twenty years ago would have checked my congregation out now won't consider crossing our doorway. We're part of the problem, they seem to think. The problem is religion. Catholics, evangelicals, Muslims, Hindus, Unitarian Universalists: what's the difference? It's all religion, and it's all bad. If this is happening in Appleton, a bastion of conservatism, I assume it's happening where you live, too.

---

[4] Thandeka, "Schleiermacher, feminism, and liberation theologies: a key" in Jacqueline Marina, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 290.

[5] Thandeka, "Affect Theology," 1.

Thandeka writes, "Our (Unitarian Universalist) communities, by liberal theological design, are made up of religion's enlightened believers as well as its cultured despisers."[6] This is precisely what's changing, even in Appleton. Religion's cultured despisers are increasingly no longer willing to cross the threshold into any religious community, even ours. It does not matter that we're liberal. It does not matter that a lot of religion's cultured despisers from the recent past are sitting in our pews and seats. It does not matter that *we* know the cultured despisers would be welcomed. It does not matter that we act publicly on progressive ideas. These new cultured despisers of religion aren't going to darken our doors unless it's for an obligatory wedding or memorial service or to assuage parents during a visit home. They aren't coming. Ever. Just like in the UK. While they were potentially "our" people just a generation ago, they no longer are our people, any more than they are the evangelical or Catholic churches' people.

So this is a moment of extreme, potentially existential danger for Unitarian Universalism. We would be foolhardy to assume secularism is going to be good for Unitarian Universalism. The UK example says emphatically that secularism might instead be just as disastrous for our faith as for all the others. If we go on our merry way thinking this is all going to magically work out for Unitarian Universalism, we may find our faith on the endangered list, too.

Part Two—1799: A Pastor/Theologian Rides in to Rescue Religion

In his introduction to Schleiermacher's *Speeches*, Rudolf Otto paints a picture of religion in 1799 being "driven into a corner," "lost in the intellectual world," threatened with "total oblivion." You can practically hear bugle calls in the background as Otto proclaims that riding to the rescue of religion was none other than Friedrich Schleiermacher, his *Speeches* in hand. "In a very short time, everybody was talking about him and his book."[7]

Schleiermacher sought to save religion from being consigned to the dustbin of history. On the one hand, he wanted to rescue it from supernaturalism and mythology.[8] Sticking to unscientific or, worse, anti-scientific explanations of the world in a scientific age was a big reason religion found itself threatened with total oblivion. On the other hand, Schleiermacher also wanted to rescue religion from the rationalists, the folks who rendered religion cold and lifeless and irrelevant to real life with their surgical-like focus on ideas and morality.

The centerpiece of Schleiermacher's rescue attempt was anchoring religion in individual feeling and intuition (or what he commonly called piety) rather than mythology or ideas or morality. Feeling is the foundation of religion, Schleiermacher declares. It begets ideas and morality, but

---

[6] *Ibid.,* p. 1.

[7] Rudolf Otto in introduction to Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), pp. vii-ix.

[8] Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, p. 49.

these are secondary and posterior to feelings.[9] This shift from mythology, ideas and morality to feeling is what Roger Olson calls Schleiermacher's Copernican revolution[10] Like Copernicus's impact on science, Schleiermacher's insight dramatically changed what followed in the theological world—particularly what would become known as liberal theology.

Given the primacy of feelings in religion, Schleiermacher asserts that the authoritative source of Christianity—or any particular religion—cannot be scriptures or dogma or doctrines or theology or church history or liturgy or religious leaders. The authoritative source for an individual's religion must be that individual's feeling and intuition. Religion is personal, unique to each person.[11]

Schleiermacher also suggests that individual human affective experiences are of paramount importance. It's not the experiences themselves that are the genesis of religion. Rather, it's the embodied feelings—the affective response—that our experiences so powerfully conjure within us.

Schleiermacher identifies the feeling of being created as a common religious feeling that arises in people. From this feeling, we can infer affectively that there is something greater on which we are dependent: the Infinite. Religion, he writes, "works its way back to the heart, and there finds the Infinite." In the heart, we feel our dependence on and our connection with the Infinite. The religious person, Schleiermacher also asserts, recognizes the underlying unity and the beauty of the all of the particularities of the world.[12]

Schleiermacher uses different names for the Infinite that we encounter in our deepest religious feelings: in addition to the Infinite, the Unity, the Eternal, the Universe, the Whole, the One, the World Spirit, and God.[13] Schleiermacher's use of a variety of words for the Infinite suggests that it is acceptable not to use God-specific language to name this. Belief in God is not a prerequisite to having a religious feeling or experience or being a religious person.[14]

---

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 37-38.

[10] Roger E. Olson, "What is 'theological liberalism?'" in *Pathos*, p. 2.

[11] Schleiermacher, pp. 15-16, 91; Robert D. Richardson, Jr., "Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists," pp. 123, 129-130.

[12] Schleiermacher, pp. 15-16, 79; Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7, pp. 151-153; Robert Merrihew Adams, "Faith and religious knowledge" in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, pp. 38, 41; Krista Duttenhaver, "Relative Freedoms: The Influence of Spinoza on the Systems of Whitehead and Schleiermacher" in Christine Helmer and Marjorie Suchocki, eds., *Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue* (De Gruyter, 2005), p. 104.

[13] Schleiermacher, p. 94.

[14] Thandeka, "Affect Theology," p. 11; James M. Brandt, *All Things New: Reform of Church and Society in Schleiermacher's* Christian Ethics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 5.

Schleiermacher proclaims that the Infinite pervades the world. Everything that is lies within it. Every piece contains the Whole. The One underlies and expresses itself in the Many, as Frederick Copleston puts it.[15] No one person or one specific religion has the ability to see the whole Unity.[16] This idea became the hallmark of liberal religion.

When we are religious, Schleiermacher continues, we recognize that every event is infused with the Infinite. Every event therefore is a miracle. Revelation is "every original and new communication of the universe to man."[17]

Schleiermacher notes that those "who see religion as a malady of the soul" especially don't seem to like religious communities of religious people or the priests or ministers who lead these communities. But in spite of centering on the individual person's feelings and experiences, Schleiermacher has no intention of ditching religious community in response to this antipathy toward churches and ministers. Community—embodied in Christianity in churches—is central to his understanding of religion. This is first of all because humans are basically sociable creatures: "This is the nature of man, and it is quite peculiarly the nature of religion."[18] Furthermore, through mutual, reciprocal and free interaction with each other in religious community, we have the opportunity to gain clarity about our own deepest feelings, about what our religion calls us to do, about whether we are heeding that call, and about the nature of the Infinite. Social beings at heart, we cannot figure this all out on our own. We are better religiously together. So community is an indispensable part of being a religious person. In Christianity, all this is captured by the idea that the church is the locus of the Spirit.[19]

Part Three—2013: A Comedian Rides in to (again) Rescue Religion

Fast forward a little more than two hundred years in the UK. Along comes Sanderson Jones, a marketer turned professional comedian who looks like Jesus (at least the tall, bearded, blue-eyed Jesus pictured by so many in the West), riding in to rescue religion from its latest brush with oblivion. And he's using several pages right out of Schleiermacher's playbook: he's reintroducing feeling and personal experience into religion, he's weaving community centrally into it, and he's nudging people to use their religious feelings to move them to do justice, or at least charity.

---

[15] Copleston, p. 158.

[16] Schleiermacher, p. 155.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

[19] Schleiermacher, pp. 150, 155, 180; Copleston, p. 156; Richardson, p. 141; Frederick C. Beiser, "Schleiermacher's Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, pp. 61-62; Walter E. Wyman, Jr., "Sin and redemption" in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, pp. 140-141; Thandeka, "Affect Theology," pp. 24-25.

The genesis of the Sunday Assembly, a self-described "godless congregation" was a trip to a joint comedy gig Jones undertook with fellow comedian Pippa Evans. As they talked in the car, they realized that they both desired to be part of a church, but it had to be a church without God. They launched the Sunday Assembly in January of 2013.[20] The Sunday Assembly—also (ingeniously) known as the Atheist Church—quickly took off in London and, to a lesser extent, in other places in the UK. Some branches have opened in the U.S., so far with more mixed results.

While I was in the UK last fall, several Unitarian Universalist colleagues came over to visit. Since he is an acquaintance of Sanderson Jones, I asked the Rev. Andy Pakula, an American Unitarian Universalist minister serving a London area Unitarian congregation, if he could arrange a conversation for us with the Sunday Assembly co-founder. Jones agreed to meet with us, and we had a fascinating conversation in Andy Pakula's church office.

Jones and the Sunday Assembly were the religious talk of London during my sabbatical. On the Tube ride back from our conversation with Jones, we had the interesting sensation of someone thumbing through a mainstream magazine across the train car aisle—with Sanderson Jones staring back at us from the cover of the magazine. He was everywhere in the media.

The day after our conversation with Jones, we attended a Sunday Assembly service, or "show" as Jones prefers to call it. The difference from services in the London area Unitarian church I served was startling. For starters, instead of a dozen or two people—the church I served was one of the larger Unitarian churches—there were by my estimate 350 enthusiastic folks jammed into the auditorium. The place was abuzz with excitement and expectation. This in a country where six percent of the population goes to church, and in a congregation that had been in existence for less than ten months!

We had to wait in a very crowded lobby before entering the auditorium. The close proximity helped stoke anticipation and excitement. It was certainly a far cry from walking into the church I served as a newcomer and seeing a handful of people scattered around the room. The doors to the auditorium opened and we joined the throng finding seats.

The guy I sat next to struck up a conversation. I learned that he had never belonged to a church and never in his wildest dreams imagined that he would. His ride on public transport to the shows took about an hour and a half each way. He hadn't missed a show since he started coming. He shared with me the things he loved most about the Sunday Assembly: its humor, its relevance, and its sense of community.

The overflowing enthusiasm of the Sunday Assembly was further highlighted by the fact that they were meeting in a building owned by a humanist association, and there was a humanist

[20] http://sundayassembly.com/faq/.

book study going on at the same time. After my chat with the guy next to me wound down, I went in search of a loo. My wanderings took my by the humanist book study. People were quietly checking in and taking their seats, books in hand. No one was talking. There were some perplexed looks from folks filing in, looks that seemed to say something like, "What the hell is that going on in the lobby? What's the matter with those people? They're so loud and boisterous." I found the loo and then headed back from the land of the dead to the living. "That humanist book group is toast," I thought. "And so probably is the Unitarian church I'm serving."

In the show, I observed that the Sunday Assembly has a concise, clear-cut mission. They focus on it like a laser. Their mission is: "Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More."

With its mission of "Live Better," the Sunday Assembly aims to help people be the people they want to be. It's much more about living deeper, more meaningful lives, in better connection with others and with Life than it is about living better in terms of prosperity or appearances. In Schleiermacher's terms, "Live Better" is about getting in touch with your feelings and body and connections with others.

And then, from that place of living better: "Help Often." The Sunday Assembly isn't an excuse for selfishness and self-absorption. It helps its members reach out to help others in need. Right now this seems to be largely translated into doing charity. I have a hunch that at least some Sunday Assembly folks will want to aim higher than that and will begin to embark on the work of justice.

In the Sunday Assembly, no one talks about God. As a self-professed godless church, God-talk is forbidden.[21] Schleiermacher's playbook gives permission to be godless. "Wonder" is another pretty good word for what Schleiermacher called the Unity or the Infinite. So, this part of the congregation's mission reminds Sunday Assembly participants to spend more time in wonderment at the miracle of existence. A subtext of this is to keep asking questions—not intellectual questions, but soul questions. No one ever finds all of ultimate truth, so keep wondering about it. Keep searching. Schleiermacher would approve of this, too.

Here are some other things I observed at the service. Those gathered didn't look demographically like the British population, but they were closer to the demographic norm ethnically and way closer in terms of age than the little Unitarian church I served. They sang contemporary songs people know like "Lean on Me." There was no organ. A kid did the reading. They showed a clip from a TV show that was both funny and poignant. A singer/songwriter performed an original song. The collection was taken in coffee cans, and I had the impression that a fair amount of bills, not just change (the norm at the Unitarian church I served), went into the offering. They were skipping the show the following Sunday and doing a community action day providing winter coats to the vulnerable instead. And after the show, it

[21] This constraint on freedom and pluralism is a significant reason I ultimately prefer Unitarian Universalism to the Sunday Assembly.

was time for tea and cakes—but not tea and a few boxes of store-bought cookies like the Unitarian church I served. Instead there were delicious looking homemade goodies brought by anyone who felt like bringing something. The atmosphere was more party-time than teatime. Those wishing another sort of refreshment after tea and cakes were welcome to retire to a nearby pub.

All of this leads first-time visitors to rapidly conclude that the Sunday Alliance is not their grandparents' church. I'm not so sure newcomers to the church I served would have come to the same conclusion. The form of our services looked a lot like standard Protestant worship from the 1800's and 1900's. The "Atheist Church," the informal name the master marketer Jones floated at the outset of the Sunday Assembly, also expressed in shorthand that this isn't your grandparents' church. Jones and Evans have since backed away from this informal name because they are, in their own words, focusing "not on Atheism but on celebrating life." But by the time they stopped using it, "Atheist Church" had become synonymous with the Sunday Assembly. That name, along with most things I observed about the show, make the Sunday Assembly a congregation that people like the man who sat beside me might even share about with family and friends without feeling embarrassed or like something must be wrong with them.

The "show" I saw was ragged around the edges. After Jones bragged to us that he had a "kick-ass" band, the band turned out to be kind of pathetic: an odd assortment of instruments that didn't quite work as an ensemble. The trumpet player at one point stopped to encourage the audience to clap, only he evidently lacked even a trace of a sense of rhythm. The flow from one thing to the next was often bumpy and disjointed. The focus of the show was Remembrance Day, and they were clearly more used to dealing with comedy and lightness than heavy subjects like remembering those who died for their country. Jones and his comedic compatriots were out of their element. They also had technical problems with the sound system. You could tell that they had a ragtag team of volunteers working on it, not professionals. And Pippa Evans was supposed to do the Address—the closest thing to our sermon—but evidently she thought better of this plan moments into the service. She asked Jones to do the Address instead. And then of course he started his Address by relating this story and noting that he hadn't had any time to prepare.

The ragged edges showed that the Sunday Assembly had only been around for ten months. Presumably some polish will come later. I mean, we Unitarian Universalists have had hundreds of years of doing services, and we're still often rough around the edges, too. Just a few weeks ago in my own congregation—a congregation large enough to have raised our quality quotient rather significantly over the past few decades—we had microphones that weren't turned on, lights malfunction, and a violinist played the entire first verse of the closing hymn in the wrong key. So I'm really not saying this to judge the Sunday Assembly harshly.

And in spite of the rough edges, last I heard, the Sunday Assembly is getting more people by the week. Now Jones and his comrades are trying to expand the Sunday Assembly to North America and other places far beyond the UK, maybe to a town near you.

Perhaps in addition to Sanderson Jones's genius, the rise of the Sunday Assembly reveals an unquenchable thirst in British culture for meaning and community. A lot of people aren't finding this watching or running in Sunday morning charity races or even at the neighborhood pub, which, like the Unitarian Church, is also on the endangered list. Maybe more than anything else, the Sunday Assembly welcomes in heart. It gives space for feeling, for laughter, and for deep connection and community. And it kindles action.

The Sunday Assembly may not have the legs or infrastructure or leadership beyond the charismatic Jones to thrive for long, but it has heart. This is worth a lot. Miraculously, in some of the most hostile territory to religion on the planet, the Sunday Assembly is getting the cultured despisers of religion—people who had written off church as ridiculous, irrelevant or downright evil—to walk in its doors, and to return the following week. The Sunday Assembly is a ray of hope in a very bleak moment in the UK for religion.

Part 4—My Answer to Today's Cultured Despisers of Religion

With inspiration from Friedrich Schleiermacher and Sanderson Jones, here is my answer to today's cultured despisers of religion:

1) If some of our people don't want to use the word "religion," I'm fine with that. According to Thandeka, only one third of Unitarian Universalists today define themselves as religious.[22] And no doubt the term has even less positive freight with the Nones. After two hundred years of further abuse after Schleiermacher's time, "religion" may be beyond salvaging, well beyond. The weight of the Scopes trial, Jim Jones, Jerry Falwell, 9/11 and so much else are just too much. I appreciate Schleiermacher's attempts to save the word. I made some similar, albeit weaker, attempts earlier in my ministry. But I'm pretty much done using "religion." I'm done sticking with words that keep people from walking in my congregation's doors. So, like Sanderson Jones, I'm using spirituality instead. Spirituality is a perfectly fine word, and it lacks so much of the baggage of religion. Besides, I note that Schleiermacher himself was similarly flexible about another very important word: God. So sorry Lillian Daniels: I'm fine with "spiritual not religious." Those folks are my people. If someone in Prairie Group or in my congregation wants to keep using "religious," I'm fine with that, too. Whatever.

2) With Lillian Daniels,[23] I don't think that watching sunsets or walking in the woods or running in charity races or being grateful for my family or stopping for a pint at the neighborhood pub is enough. Don't get me wrong: I appreciate all these things. I've found meaning in each one of them, sometimes a lot. But I need more than this. I need a place where I can wrestle with life's meaning, where I can share my questions and doubts and frustrations and,

---

[22] Thandeka, "Affect Theology," p. 21.

[23] Lillian Daniels, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even in Church* (New York: Jericho, 2013).

even more importantly when they arise, my feelings of hopelessness and despair with fellow travelers. I need a place where I can find at least a nickel's worth of sense in the beautiful sunset and the several kids in my church struggling with cancer and spiraling mayhem in the Middle East. I can't make sense of all this on my own. I need community. I need spiritual community. I need folks who will accept me and love me and support me. And I need people who have the guts to tell me when they think my actions don't match my words and beliefs or my life is off track. I'll be honest: I'm lost without spiritual community. I think a lot of people are, even some cultured despisers of religion. So I say to them: If your life is missing something, why not give a Unitarian Universalist congregation a go?

3) I continue to be committed to making sure feeling is front and center in all of my congregation's activities. So, cultured despisers of religion, my Fellowship won't be a place where you have to check your brains OR your hearts at the door. Bring your whole self in, body included. And bring your experiences. Come to my congregation to make sense of what you've experienced, with fellow travelers and an ever-evolving tradition.

4) While I agree with Schleiermacher that religion (or spirituality) begins with feelings and intuition, I also agree that when we are in synch with our feelings and they are life-giving, we will feel called to live in ethical ways. We will feel called to do the work of justice in our individual lives and with those in our spiritual community.

Postscript—Two Final Thoughts for My Prairie Group Colleagues

I will conclude with two final thoughts not for the cultured despisers of religion, but for you, my Prairie Group colleagues.

First, and this is inspired far more by Sanderson Jones than Schleiermacher: Folks, we need to get a LOT more clever and skilled at marketing. I know: once the cultured despisers come they need to find something compelling, something that speaks to them, to their real experiences and feelings and confusions. But we also have to get them in the door in the first place. Getting people who have written ours and every other faith off as irrelevant or evil to come into our doors for something more than a wedding or memorial service or to make their parents happy when they're home visiting—well, this is going to take some outside-the-box thinking. Sanderson Jones has shown us that perhaps this is not a hopeless task.

Let me be clear: I'm not talking just about traditional advertising. I'm talking about something like Jones' ingenious use of "Atheist Church" or Andy Pakula's organizing a "Wake on the Wild Side" memorial service last fall for Lou Reed that filled his London church with people and media who had never heard of Unitarianism.[24] I'm talking about encouraging our members to become more willing to talk about our congregations and our Unitarian Universalist faith with family, friends, neighbors and coworkers—even as it becomes more embarrassing to belong to

[24] http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/wake-wild-side-lou-reed-memorial-held-london/.

any sort of congregation. "I'm not going to take ten times the salary of the lowest-paid worker in my company because I'm Unitarian Universalist" or "I'm working for marriage equality because I'm Unitarian Universalist" causes the same kind of cognitive dissonance in folks as saying "I belong to the Atheist Church." It gives religion's cultured despisers the opportunity to take a second look.

And finally, dear colleagues, I rise in defense of a liturgical element in some of our Unitarian Universalist congregations that I suspect makes a lot of you reflexively cringe, if not gag: the Congregational Response to the sermon. The Congregational Response has gotten a bad name and fallen into increasing disuse for some very good reasons. A combination of factors seemingly did it in: overly intellectualized responses (captured well by the horrid name one church in Wisconsin gave its Congregational Response, which fortunately took place after and not within the service: Mind Rub); getting caught in the buzz-saw of post 1960s anti-authoritarianism in so many of our congregations, particularly fellowships; too many laity viewing the Congregational Response as open season for attacking the minister (earning it another most unfortunate nickname: Talk Back); and given the often hostile responses, too many ministers then going into the Congregational Response with either a circle-the-wagons defensive mentality or simply sitting silently (sullenly?) while it takes place, thus forfeiting the golden dialogical opportunity it presents. We hear "Congregational Response," and we picture a small, probably dying, all head/no heart little fellowship, sitting in a circle rubbing each others' minds. What could be worse?

So is the Congregational Response salvageable? My experience at the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship tells me it is. We continue to have Congregational Response in our services most weeks. It's been one of the most significant reasons for our sevenfold growth these past twenty-four years. It powerfully communicates to the cultured despisers of religion who walk in our doors that this is a different sort of congregation. Even now as a larger congregation, it still works.

The key to making Congregational Response work is in how it is framed. At my congregation, our services and the sermon in particular are meant to be interactive: they are intended to interact with people's spiritual journeys, with their affective selves. Services and sermons are not meant to interact only with people's ideas. So we frame the Congregational Response as an opportunity for everyone to explore how their individual journey interacts with the sermon's message. A few are then invited to articulate this interaction aloud (while most do it silently). The focus of the response is on the sharing of feelings and experiences—the heart of the spiritual journey—not sharing intellectual ideas and questions.

I tend to reply to most of the responses. This gives me an opportunity to continue the teaching from the sermon, and also to articulate the ways I have stepped into the learner role. What I hear changes me. This is reflected through the course of our three weekend services: the Congregational Responses reshape the sermon. What unfolds through the weekend is a mutual dialogue of people sharing our spiritual journeys.

Recently I did a sermon on conceiving the spiritual life as a perpetual pilgrimage. In the Congregational Response following the service, one congregant shared about her spiritual journey through life-threatening cancer as a pilgrimage. Another, who had never previously spoken aloud in the Congregational Response, shared about how having both of her parents' die in the previous year launched her into the awful, dangerous pilgrimage experience called grief. She sees now some of the gifts flowing from her continuing journey through grief—like feeling self-confident for the first time in her life. Another person shared about his growing realization that it's time to leave a stable but dysfunctional, soul-sapping job. I remember a sermon I did several years ago about how the South African Truth and Reconciliation process could provide insights for our personal struggles with forgiveness. A woman stood up in the Congregational Response and shared her anguish about whether and how to forgive the man who held her captive, violently assaulted her and left her for dead. His trial some years later posed these questions to her with renewed force. They still linger.

This is not a mind rub! It's people sharing their real, embodied experiences and feelings. The communication is holy. Far more often than not, Congregational Response enables all of us—congregants and minister—to go deeper into the message, to learn more, and ultimately, to live better.

Reading *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, it occurs to me that my congregation's Congregational Response is beautifully in tune with some of the principles Schleiermacher explicates as hallmarks of religious community.

First of all, as described above, Congregational Response elicits feelings and experiences, not ideas and intellectual quibbles. "The communication of religion," Schleiermacher writes, "is not like the communication of ideas and perceptions to be sought in books. In this medium, too much of the pure impression of the original production is lost."[25] This captures the difference between a Mind Rub on the one hand, and a Congregational Response where people contemplate and share real experiences and feelings.

Second, Congregational Response embodies the kind of free, mutual communication that lies for Schleiermacher at the very centerpiece of religious community: "The society of the pious...is occupied purely with mutual communication," he writes.[26] Robert Richardson in "Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists" notes that Schleiermacher wrote about the dialogue form as "an essential part of Plato's message." This idea was the genesis for Schleiermacher's

---

[25] Schleiermacher, p. 150.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

theory of hermeneutics. As Richardson puts it, Schleiermacher believes "that communication is the indispensable basis of community."[27]

So religious community comes to life as minister and congregants hear and speak to one another. None of us can grasp the Unity on our own. We need each other; we need mutual communication to get a better and deeper sense of the Unity. "In the true religious society all communication is mutual." Schleiermacher unambiguously makes the case that for the communication in religious community to be mutual, the minister must at times be the listener. He rejects an ontological distinction between laity and clergy. There is "no distinction of persons, but only of office and function." [28] When we are ordained, an important change happens: we have a new office and function. But no ontological change happens. Congregational Response gives me as a minister the public opportunity after being the speaker to become the listener, and then to enter into mutual dialogue.

There are two keys to making Congregational Response work. Both are consistent with Schleiermacher's ideas.

The first is to make sure the sermon is grounded in actual religious experience and feeling and not focused on abstract ideas or actions. Schleiermacher writes about the minister coming forward in religious community "to present to the sympathetic contemplation of others his own heart as stirred by God."[29] Schleiermacher writes a little later:

> If the members of the church had any understanding of religion, the chief matter for them would be that the person whom they have made the organ of religion communicate his clearest, most characteristic views and feelings.[30]

Whether directly influenced by Schleiermacher or not, Emerson picks up this theme in his "Divinity School Address" when he laments that too many preachers have lost touch with their feelings and experiences. He describes a preacher who

> had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted,

---

[27] Richardson, pp. 127-128, 140.

[28] Schleiermacher, p. 153, 155, 158.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 160.

> we were none the wiser…Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine.[31]

The second key to enabling Congregational Response to work in a way consistent with Schleiermacher's principles is for the minister never, ever to respond defensively. Responding defensively is a sure recipe for morphing the Congregational Response into "Talk Back." By never responding defensively over a period of years, the minister can deflect and eventually all but eliminate attacking responses.

The situation facing religion today is not all that different from the situation it faced in 1799: religion is on the ropes, even more so today if the UK and its six percent regular church-going population is any indication. I don't know that Sanderson Jones has read Schleiermacher—German theology is not standard preparation for marketing and comedy. But his work in kindling the Sunday Assembly is Schleiermachian. We would be wise to pay it, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, some attention.

---

[31] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address" in *3 Prophets of Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1986), p. 103.