

# “Is Faith a Good Thing?”

A Sermon Given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts  
On January 14, 2005  
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

In a recent sermon, my colleague Betty Kornitzer said, “Perhaps you’ve noticed that I am always referring to us as a people of faith. And you may have been thinking to yourself, ‘Betty, we’re UUs, what are you talking about?’

“Well, you know, just because we do not adhere to a particular religious creed, does not mean that we are non believers. I see faith as a passage, an unfolding of the spirit. Thus, being a faith community is not only about what we do, it is also about the consciousness with which we do it. This is well expressed by Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, the author of a book entitled *Faith*. She explains that in the Pali language, the word for “faith” is “saddha,” which literally means “to place the heart upon.” I think that is so utterly beautiful – when we have faith – a belief – we place our heart upon it.

“Listen – and feel this –

“I place my heart upon the inherent worth and dignity of every person.’

“I place my heart upon the goal of world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all.’

“I place my heart upon respect for the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part.’

“Isn’t that exquisite? Can you doubt that we are a community of faith, my friends?”

Well, it depends. It depends on what you mean by faith. I use phrases myself like our “faith community,” our “faith tradition,” and our personal searches for sustaining faith. Rarely a memorial service concludes but that I don’t say that we go forth in faith as well as in hope and undying love.

Now in fact, I don’t understand the word “faith” in exactly the same way that Betty Kornitzer does, and I’ll get to that later. But if like Betty’s parishioner you also wonder sometimes why I feel free to use it at all in the halls of UU, I sympathize. Because I know that neither she nor I is using the word “faith” the way many people understand the term, whether they see it as virtuous or foolish (maybe sometimes as both).

For many people, including not a few of you here today, “faith” means accepting something as true irrespective of any evidence. “Faith is a non-rational belief in some proposition,” wrote one writer [Robert Todd Carroll] recently in his own *Skeptic’s Dictionary*, echoing in fancier language what Mark Twain said, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”

In the same era, Robert Ingersoll opined that “The foundation of superstition is ignorance, the superstructure is faith and the dome is a vain hope.” Other notable skeptics have chipped in since. Ambrose Bierce defined faith as “Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.” And H. L. Mencken wrote that “Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.”

This outlook has recently been taken up with a vengeance by the author Sam Harris in his popular book, *The End of Faith*, an assault upon religion as a reliance on faith instead of reason and mysticism, two things he endorses, while he believes that faith threatens to doom the world.

(I wrote the second half of that last sentence and thought, zounds [or some word like that], that really is the point of the book, which would be hard to convey in thirty pages, twelve, or even four, but there it is in twenty-two words. Though if you want to be stimulated, elated in

agreement and/or upset in objection, and just have the fun of Harris' zesty, feisty writing and thinking, you could read it yourself. I would love to know your reactions.)

And please understand, Harris' attack on the ignorance and violence fostered by much religious faith does not at all spare those of us whom he calls the moderates. "One of the central themes of this book," he writes, "is that religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others.... The very idea of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever her [or she] believes about God – is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss." [14-15]

Because, he notes in detail, the basic texts of the major religions, including Christianity but especially Islam, abound in irrationality, hatred of opposition, and glorification of violence. "The problem that religious moderation poses for all of us is that it does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism....[20] To speak plainly and truthfully about the state of our world – to say, for instance, that the Bible and the Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish – is antithetical to tolerance as moderates currently conceive it. But we can no longer afford the luxury of such political correctness. We must finally recognize the price we are paying to maintain the iconography of our ignorance." [22-3]

Harris does acknowledge that "there are millions of people whose faith moves them to perform extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others.... [But that] does not suggest that faith itself is a necessary (or even a good) motivation for goodness. It can be quite possible, even reasonable, to risk one's life to save others without believing any incredible ideas about the nature of the universe.

"By contrast, the most monstrous crimes against humanity have invariably been inspired by unjustified belief." [78-79]

He concludes, "For anyone with eyes to see, there can be no doubt that religious faith remains a perpetual source of human conflict. Religion persuades otherwise intelligent men and women to not think, or to think badly, about questions of civilizational importance. And yet it remains taboo to criticize religious faith in our society, or to even observe that some religions are less compassionate and less tolerant than others. What is worst in us (outright delusion) has been elevated beyond the reach of criticism, while what is best (reason and intellectual honesty) must remain hidden, for fear of giving offense." [236-7]

And he is not alone. We seem to be going in two opposite directions at once in the country. True, as Harris says, "Because it is taboo to criticize a person's religious beliefs, political debate over questions of public policy (stem cell research, the ethics of assisted suicide and euthanasia, obscenity and free speech, gay marriage, etc.) generally get framed in terms appropriate to a theocracy. Unreason is now ascendant in the United States – in our schools, in our courts, and in each branch of the federal government." [230]

But Harris has cohorts. A month ago in an interview [with the *New York Times* magazine section], Peter Watson, author of a history of ideas, was asked, "What do you think is the worst idea in history?" And he replied, "Without question, ethical monotheism. The idea of one true god. The idea that our life and ethical conduct on earth determines how we will go in the next world. This has been responsible for most of the wars and bigotry in history." [12/1/05]

The sentiment was echoed in a magazine piece [in the *New Yorker*] on the British author Philip Pullman, "who once told an interviewer that 'every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him.'" [12/26/05, 52]

But Watson was challenged with the observation that "religion has also been responsible for investing countless lives with meaning and inner richness." To which he replied, "I lead a perfectly healthy, satisfactory life without being religious. And I think more people should try it." (Let me say that while I won't have time to develop the thought this morning, all evidence – and there is ever more evidence being compiled – continues to show that there is no correlation

between faith and morality, as counterintuitive as that may be. This is most strikingly when one compares the religiosity of countries or of American states with their relative levels of moral or ethical behavior as normally computed.)

The whole question, not just of faith but of religion itself, has been coming up a lot of late, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, and in the continuing acts of violence perpetrated by people who seem motivated by their religious faith. In books like *Terror in the Name of God* by Jessica Stern, *When Religion Becomes Evil* by Charles Kimball, and Harris' own book – and there are lots more – the question is often put like this: Is religion the problem?

For Harris, the answer is simply yes, since he assumes religion involves faith, which he assumes means a slavish devotion to ancient, outdated, and often unhealthy sources of information and guidance. (The upside of this grim assessment for those of us here is, you know your brother-in-law who contends that Unitarian Universalism isn't a real religion? From Harris' point of view, that is high praise.)

But when others raise the question – for instance, when Jessica Stern asks, “Is there something inherently dangerous about religion?” [xviii] -- the answer is more complex. Kimball has a chapter titled, “Is Religion the Problem?” with one section on “Why Those Say Yes Are Right – In Part,” and then a section on “Why Those Who Say No Are Right – In Part.”

Kimball recognizes that “more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.” [1] And he shares Harris' conviction that the world is in very big danger if religions cannot avoid five tendencies he identifies as those that can lead religious people to do evil: absolute claims to the truth, blind obedience, efforts to establish an “ideal time,” the notion that ends justify means, and holy war.

But Kimball thinks that “far from exhausting all the paths toward peace, we have only begun to marshal the positive energies of religious people.” [212] And he thinks that there are sources in each faith tradition, substantiation in scripture and heritage, to support the effort to create a world where religions peacefully, respectfully co-exist if they can only so choose.

Jessica Stern's big contribution is to try to figure out, as her subtitle puts it, “Why Religious Militants Kill.” The answer is more complex than religion alone, involving feelings of deep angst and fear, alienation, humiliation, unmet aspirations, negations, despair, and even greed. But the religious nature it assumes makes the problem especially dangerous, because as she discovered in years of talking with militants of many faiths all over the world, they believe themselves to be “saints and martyrs” [xxviii], on the side of good and of God, spiritual souls engaged in a righteous battle against evil.

But like Kimball and unlike Harris, she too, believes that it is possible to counter the appeal of violent religious faith by strengthening the moderates in each tradition, as well as by confounding the immoderates into internal disputes, and holding “fast to the best of our [own] principles, by emphasizing tolerance, empathy and courage” [296] and avoiding spiritual dread. She also has some suggestions about U.S. foreign policy, about avoiding behaviors like torture and invasions that undermine our idealistic claims and are powerful recruiting tools for terrorism.

But as I said, as to the power of religions to become less violent, she is more hopeful than Harris. Harris has hope, but it is in leaving religion behind, recognizing that decent, virtuous, generous human behavior is simply human. Everything Martin Luther King said so brilliantly, drawing on biblical language, would still be as true in this view. But Harris hopes that one fine day we will realize King's goals are innately human, “that we do, in fact, love our neighbors, that our happiness is inextricable from their own, and that our interdependence demands that people everywhere are given the opportunity to flourish.” In the words that follow, he holds this realization to be absolutely critical. “The days of our religious identities are clearly numbered. Whether the days of civilization itself are numbered would seem to depend, rather too much, on how soon we realize this.” [227]

Others deem religion more improvable, and I confess, as I consider humankind, while that prospect may be ambitious, it seems more likely than Harris' solution, given all that people expect of religion now and seem to get from it in solace and meaning and hope.

But understand, Harris does believe in more than just reason, he values mysticism as well, which he takes to be "a rational enterprise." He seeks "to bring reason, spirituality, and ethics together in our thinking about the world," and with it "the end of faith." [221]

And so we are back to faith as a part of it all. If I were to accept Harris' view of faith – the one shared by Mark Twain and Mencken – I would have to agree that it is a dubious part of a UU minister's vocabulary.

But for me, faith means something other than belief in the unsupportable. Some of you may remember the popular notion several decades ago that "God is a verb," which is to say, a process, a becoming, and not a set thing. Well, for me, "faith" is like that – it isn't a thing, it is an attitude, an ongoing heritage, in our case a resilient hopefulness, a persistent resolve to engage in the world on behalf of its promise, the possibilities for life more fair and kind.

I "faith" that. I belong to a community – ours – that holds on to that "faithing" as a tradition and as an ongoing hope and commitment. I place my heart upon it.