

Address: Why Go To Church?

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"Why go to church?" is a question, no doubt, we have all been asked at some time and perhaps even asked ourselves. It is a question that has been asked of me at school by kids, "How can you go to church? You're a scientist!"

The fact that the question is posed at all is a reflection of the age we live in. Statistics show that in the United Kingdom, 10% of children born in the first decade of the 20th century would have been born into a household of "no religion". Compare that with 60% of those born in the 1980's. We now live in a secular age where "coming out" as church goer is to invite the assumption that one is some sort of religious fruit cake. Our 3 readings this morning reflected common reasons people give for not going to church. We heard from Rowan Williams various reasons why people don't go to church. *"It's boring"*.

I can hear my younger daughter Rebecca's voice in my head saying it.

"Ritual is experienced by many as empty, lacking in spontaneity, impersonal."

I recently attended a family baptism in the local Roman Catholic Church. Believe me I you want ritual that is the place to go. What made it for me though was the little kid in the pew behind me who was bombarding his endlessly patient mother with questions all the way through the service. Why was he pouring water on the babies? Why was he pouring oil on the babies? When the priest took a candle and lit it from the big candle to give each child the "Light of Christ" the youngster asked, "Is he going to set fire to the babies now mummy?" Outside, my elder daughter Rachel, a dyed in the wool Humanist, asked incredulously, "What was that all about?"

If our rituals are devoid of meaning and impersonal, it is small wonder that people no longer attend. In a recent edition of The Enquirer the question was posed by Sue Wooley, "should Unitarians be happy?" Should we indulge in more ecstatic forms of worship? Well I don't know about you but I was brought up Church of Scotland. There's the story of the Elder who brought his friend to a service for the first time. Every time the minister said something the guest liked he would shout "Hallelujah". Eventually the minister asks the elder, "Would you mind asking your friend our friend to be quiet?" "Sorry minister", comes the reply, "he's got religion". "Well," says to the minister, "he didn't get it here!" Happy clappy is not for me. However I am aware that our worship has to be meaningful and that it is good from time to time not to get stuck in a rut, but to be prepared to explore other ways of expressing our spirituality.

We heard from Luke Haughton about his reluctance to go back to church because of a bad experience. Many people have had a bad experience of church, usually because those inside have failed to live by the standards they preach. Call this Holy Willie Syndrome.

Churches can attract people who assume an attitude of being morally superior to others, or who use the church as a vehicle for their own personal aggrandisement.

It is not just Christianity that suffers from this. There is the old story of the Jew who is stranded on a desert island. When his rescuers arrive they notice he has built two synagogues on the island.

"Haime, why have you built two synagogues?"

"This one I worship in each Shabbat. That one...I would never set foot in that place!"

Perhaps, like Haime, the trick is not to be put off by bad experiences, but to find a place where one is welcome, warts and all, and where one is not forced to change ones views or beliefs to conform to someone else's spiritual rod.

In our final reading we heard from Massimo Pigliucci on an often heard phrase these days, "I'm spiritual rather than religious".

The Euro Barometer Poll in 2005 found that 78% of people in the United Kingdom believe in God or believe in a spirit or life force and yet church attendance is down to 15% of the population. There is clearly a disconnect between traditional religion and the population at large. The product on offer is clearly not satisfying the customers' needs. As the Williams put it, *"Religion is a private affair between my God and me, and what happens on Sundays in church is irrelevant. Why go?"*

It is against this background that the question "Why go to church?" must be set. I had to think long and hard about this one. You know I could not think of one persuasive reason I could give someone who has no interest in matters spiritual as to why they should go to church no more than I could persuade someone with absolutely no interest in football to turn up at

Parkhead or Ibrox every week. So why then do people go? I think the answer to that is very simple. We are social animals. We need the company of other people, especially other people who share our common interests.

For example, it is perfectly possible to watch a big Scotland international football match on television in the comfort of your own home if you don't have a ticket for the match. And yet, the pubs are crowded with people, struggling to see the screen and avoid spilling their beer. Why? To enjoy the atmosphere. To share with others the highs and lows of the game. To celebrate the triumphs or in Scotland's case more often, to collectively drown their sorrows and criticise the manager for his poor choice of team.

Another example of this is book reading. There cannot be many more activities better suited to doing on your own than sitting down in peace and quiet and reading a book and yet you will find people who go to book reading clubs. They'll read a book and meet to discuss the plot or whatever. Is it really that different with church going? You know I stopped going to the Church of Scotland nearly twenty years ago. I cannot report any bad experience, nor did I encounter any people there who shunned me or made me feel unwelcome. They really were a group of very nice people who always made me welcome. I just felt I didn't belong there. They had a set of beliefs that did not concord with mine.

I remember a few years ago going to the Scotland Norway game at Hampden with my cousin Billy. He had lived in Norway for most of his adult life and we went with a few of his Norwegian friends to the game. Trouble was we were at the Norway end. Now don't get me wrong. The Norwegians are nice people and I really enjoyed their company but I so wanted to be at the other end, sitting with the Scotland fans, singing the songs of glory. I needed to be with like minded people.

This brings me back rather nicely to the question on hand. Why go to church? The only way I answer this properly is to be more specific. Why do I go **this** church? I go to this church because I enjoy going to this church. Now the words "enjoy" and "going to church" are not always together in the same sentence. But there you go. I make no apology. If I didn't enjoy it, believe me, I wouldn't come back. So why do I enjoy coming to this church? Well first of all it is important to me. I am interested in religion, in matters spiritual. I have found that in this community that, to continue the football analogy, I am now sitting at the right end of the ground.

Like me, this community has its roots in liberal Christianity but it is not defined by it, rather acknowledging these roots and carrying the best of this tradition with it. It is also informed by a great Humanist tradition. Like me, this tradition understands that human beings are responsible for their own actions, for their own morality and accountable ultimately to each other. Like me it is informed by natural religion, first by the Deists who recognised "nature's god" and latterly by neo-pagan traditions that recognise the relationship between ourselves and the universe of which we are an integral part.

Here I find others with common values. At the heart of our faith community is the right, indeed duty, to form our own beliefs based on our individual life experiences and understanding. Some may think that this is a disadvantage, to have such diverse opinions, but I count it as strength. To be sitting in a congregation surrounded by friends who are Christian, Humanist, Pagan or whatever and that these differences of path don't matter is wonderful. As one of our founders, Francis David, said, "*We don't have to think alike to love alike*".

You know, I am a great fan of the writings of the great archaeo mythologist Joseph Campbell. The first time I came here Cahal Courtney was preaching his first sermon here. He referenced Campbell. Can you imagine that happening in my old parish? No way. I knew right away that I had come to the right place. Campbell wrote, "*You enter the forest at the darkest point where there is no path. Where there is a way or path, it is someone else's path. You are not on your own path. If you follow someone else's way you are not going to realise **your** potential. Your own path you make with every step you take. That is why it is your path.*"

Here, in this place, we can all follow our own paths. We can realise our potential.

Also, as a community, we value reason in our search for truth and understanding. This great inheritance from the Enlightenment, the very Age of Reason itself, is especially important to me as a scientist. As Thoreau said, "*There is more religion in men's science than science in their religion*". We read from Massimo Pigliucci earlier, "*I am not a dualist*". Neither am I. I cannot teach the laws of physics during the week then suspend my belief in them on a Sunday to conform to some ancient creed.

O.K. some may say. We get the picture. But still, "Why go? What do you actually do there?" Well worship for a start. To give thanks to god or whatever we understand this to mean. To

celebrate and reinforce our highest values. To enjoy the music, the readings the poetry. To sing. To pray. To meditate. To learn from others, including those from other faith traditions and to enjoy the company of friends. Is this not enough? Well one more. Perhaps the most important of all. To help others. I believe that our actions, how we live our daily lives, how we interact with our fellow humans is an integral part of our faith. What do our individual theologies matter if they don't make us better people. In an age of unbridled consumerism, of the "me first" society, it is still important to give something back. Jesus said, "*What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his own soul?*" We have to give something back. To help others find their own spiritual path. To help others less fortunate than ourselves, whether by campaigning to support the civil and religious liberties of others or to pool our money to help those who are financially unable to help themselves at home or abroad. So there you have it. Why I go to church. It may not be popular these days. As Matthew Arnold put it so poetically in "Dover Beach",

*The sea of faith was once too at the full
And round the earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
It's melancholy long withdrawing roar
Retreating, to the breath of the night wind
Down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

It seems we church goers are rowing against the tide but has that not always been the Unitarian way? To go against the tide of public opinion and stand up for what is right? If I can again refer to our reading from Pigliucci,

"We are not meant to live like brutes but to follow virtue and knowledge."

It is popular these days to sum up ideas in a thirty second sound bite or elevator speech. Certainly, if I had delivered this address in an elevator the passengers would have already switched off and be dying to get out. As some of you might be right now!

I can do no better than quote from Andrew Pakula, "*I am a Unitarian because I believe that what we do with our hands to help others is more important than what we believe and because love matters. All love*".

So what are your reasons for going to church? As a good Unitarian I can't tell you. As good Unitarians you will have to work that out for yourselves.