

## **“Words and Phrases: Confessions of a Reluctant Religious Liberal”**

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Hi, my name is Kat and I'm a Religious Educator. This is where you're supposed to say “Hi Kat”. Hi everyone. I have a confession to make, because...well, actually, it's more like: My name is Kat and I'm a Religious Educator whose afraid of the word religious. No, seriously, it scares me. I have trouble with that.

When I meet people for the first time and they ask what I do:

“Well, I'm a mom. Yeah, my 5 year old just started kindergarten; its really great. And, well, I'm a teacher but, well, I'm a substitute teacher right now actually. And, um, well....I work at the Unitarian (cough) Church of Edmonton. Um, church, yes, I said church. No, no, not the United Church, actually, it's...um, Unitarian. Yeah. I'm the...and often, I cop out right here. I'm the Director of Education there!”

Do I really need to say Religious Education? So, they inevitably ask:

“Okay, what do you do there?”

“Well, I, um...run the children's programming.”

“Oh, so you teach Sunday School?”

“Um, yes...but....”

Then I start rambling on about character education, multiculturalism, environmentalism, anything, really, to make it clear that I'm not actually teaching Bible stories.

For shame. I feel really bad about this! I mean, what do I have against the religious anyway? It's just that, well, I'm not sure that words like church and religious really represent me, you know?

I grew up in a very un-religious household. My mother doesn't mind religion so much, but she never really minded giving it up when my dad came along, either. My father the (whisper) ex-Catholic. My dad I would describe as an atheist who doesn't really feel the need to comment on it. We lived in a very rational world. When I started to develop an interest in spirituality, I was sort of embarrassed by it. I would actually hide books about spiritual topics behind other books on my bookshelf as a teenager, not because I would get in trouble or anything, but because I thought they might make fun of me!

So there's that, right? Maybe I'm just uptight, coming to religion as a non-religious person. I could explain away this discomfort with religious language, this instinct I have to want to substitute in secular terminology for the things that we do, as just a part of my own personal neuroticism.

However, I'm not entirely sure it's just me. There is that whole thing about really religious people being responsible for a lot of violence and war. You know, there's been a lot of bad done in the name of religion and, um, Crusades and the Inquisition and stuff.

Today, religion kind of reads to me as if it's synonymous with conservatism. We're here in this place that celebrates something called Religious Liberalism, but not I'm actually sure that there are many people out there who are aware of the existence of something called a religious liberal. To listen to the media, church-folk are the family

values folk. They are right-wing America. They were the supporters of George Bush, the war in Iraq, and FREEDOM, which has something to do with being allowed to own a gun, but not allowed to terminate a pregnancy. They are, in the words of Bill Meyer, "Religulous". I know that's not what we are, but does anyone outside these walls, driving by something called a church, know?

Well, I took it to the streets. Okay, actually, I took it to some of my friends and people I sort of bumped into last week. It was hardly scientific research, but I wanted to check in with some other people who I respected; people who seemed reasonable, intelligent, liberal, and generally amenable to the kinds of principles and values that we promote here. I brought to them five words, five scary words, that I have difficulty relating to, to see what I might find.

There were six interviewees. I'm not going to name them (because I promised I wouldn't; that was part of the deal), but I'll give you a little background bio on each of them so you can picture a sort of panel of commentators in your mind.

The first is actually a Unitarian, and a younger adult. The second is another Unitarian, this one a mother with young children. Both are actually relatively new Unitarians as well, which I think is important, as they are still sort of processing what it means to be here. Then we have our activist, an anarchist and sort of a dabbler in Buddhism. The next is my New-Agey interviewee; someone who has explored neo-paganism and would generally describe herself as spiritual. And then the final two are both people who were raised religious. They were both part of religions that required them to follow practices that set them apart from their peers at school; dogmatic religions that preached that they were right and others were wrong. Both of these two left these faiths – one keeping a place for spirituality in her life, whereas the other one is adamantly atheist and really has no use for religion. So you might be able to guess on some of the answers who it's coming from. Or maybe not.

My first frightening word is: Religion

Okay, this one isn't all that frightening to me. I actually find the idea of religions, as in world religions, rather interesting. First of all, it's easy to think of religions as something outside of myself. Someone's religion might be sort of like their heritage, really, something cultural. Their background. Having been raised as the politically correct daughter of two teachers, I can handle that one.

When I asked my interviewees how they reacted to the term, however, well, here are some responses:

"Not positively. When someone says religion, I think inflexible, rigid, unaccepting, judgmental. No freedom. From day one, religion wasn't going to be a part of me."

"I see it as an institution. There's a hierarchy. There's a lot to do with power between the clergy and the parishioners. I don't have a terribly good reaction to it."

"Generally, not positively; most people are attached to dogmatic interpretations of their religion in a way that short-circuits actual genuine experience, contemplation and understanding."

Ouch. Harsh. I mean, I get it, though. Maybe it's those preconceived notions that we hold informed by the media, as I was saying earlier: religion to North Americans might automatically read as a conservative Abrahamic faith. Here's another answer:

"Depends on what day you catch me. It implies a personal deity. Belief in some supernatural person, having personhood, and a going concern with human affairs. It's

silly. I don't personally see anything of value in it. It's just nonsense, like Santa Claus."

(Sigh) Oooh. Well, okay. There was some more positive commentary too. All of those interviewed qualified their answers, several echoing the sentiment that religion isn't innately bad, and that it is often just "twisted" or used as "an excuse for bad behaviour".

I'm sure that this focus on the bad behaviour is unfair, and largely fueled the way polarized debate is created in the media when it comes to religion. After all, religion is often used as an excuse for good behaviour too, you know. That just doesn't seem worth counting sometimes, I guess, just as when you turn on the news the things that went right that day in the world are less likely to be reported.

My real desire is not a debate about the validity of religion so much as a question about how we relate to the term. Where do we fit into it? Does it belong to us? Does the image it creates for people, the skeptical, questioning people that we embrace here, do us justice? Here is an answer one of my Unitarian interviewees gave me:

"My paradigm has changed. Before the Unitarian Church, I would have said: constraining and confining; an over-arching set of rules that benefit some and leave out others. Being a Unitarian...it's so unlike other religions. I don't want to be lumped into that group in the common way of thinking about it. I always tell people: yeah, it's a religion, but a lot of atheists go there....I feel like I need to qualify it."

The other Unitarian commented:

"I have a hard time calling Unitarianism a religion; it's a school of thought. On the other hand, it is a group of people who come together with certain beliefs, it's just that they may have other beliefs as well."

Our next word was: Church

Here are some answers I got:

"Even more structured than religion; it's a building. I have a hard time not associating the terms with the Catholic/Christian thing, so it's not a word that attracts me."

"It's almost like we shouldn't have that name: church. It should be called something different maybe."

For me it's really good now, because of going here. I have a better feeling about other churches as well. I feel better about church in general. Before coming here I would have thought: very male dominated. Jesus and God and priests were all men. Not very woman friendly.

Another comment.

"The word sounds inherently Christian. No other religion calls it that. I think that if Unitarians wanted to reach out to more people, we shouldn't call this a church. I like the word congregation; it's accurate. We're people, congregating."

"It has a negative connotation. It implies brainwashing and allowing yourself to be brainwashed. People go to church to have their fantastical beliefs reinforced; it helps shelter them from reality."

"I think mainstream religion. It's a negative reaction. It's just not community. It brings discomfort"

The church word is hard, but we know that, as Unitarians, right? Some of our own don't actually call themselves churches. Congregations, Fellowships, attempts to get around that reaction that the word can produce.

Although, I really related to that comment that one person made, that since coming here, they found themselves to be softening to the word. I find that too. I'm hearing more of the positive in the word, and not just in relation to this, my own community, but in relation to others as well; even those who belong to more conservative faiths.

As I work, volunteer, and participate in this community my idea of what church is really for is shifting away from questions of belief and indoctrination to something else. By choosing to use the word, I find it's starting to break down my prejudices a little bit. Even if we preach different things, church people all make food for one another when they have special events. They have volunteers who make things happen. They are intergenerational communities and they get together to take care of one another. I like that I'm hearing that more in the word now.

God

Now, because I wasn't raised with this concept at all, I don't think I have all the baggage attached to it that many people might. In fact, this answer I got from a fellow Unitarian interviewee sort of echoes my own sentiments. This is taken verbatim:

"Meh. It doesn't bother me. I don't know what I think. It confuses me personally."

Others who were reacting to the faiths they grew up in, took it another way:

"It's a masculine term. I kind of take offense to it, because I really don't believe that god has gender. At the same time I'm frustrated because I don't know what else to use for it."

"As a Unitarian, I think of God as a very loose term. Just sort of like the universe and nature and those kinds of things, with humanity being a part of that too. Pre-Unitarian, I did have conflict with that term. It was patriarchal. The man in the sky. Generally oppressive and negative."

I got these really positive answers:

"I think having an intentional spirituality to your life is a good thing. The biblical sense of God is brought up easily, but there are other images, like Hindu gods or ancient Greek gods. I do feel really comforted thinking that there's something way bigger than me out there."

"I'm changing and growing. Right now, I believe God is a force that runs through all of us. I'm thinking there is no God as a being. How he's supposed to be perceived is love."

And also these extremely negative ones:

"I don't like the thought of "gods". They're all the same thing. Doesn't matter if it's Zeus or Yahweh. They make demands and mete out rewards and punishment. I'm not more or less impressed with any of them."

"If people talk about God, referring to their personal God, I tend to tune them out, as if they don't have anything useful to tell me. I tend to think of them as crazy for using the word."

Maybe it's because of this variety of interpretations that it feels awkward, to me, to use the word God in a Unitarian context. I mean, it doesn't really offend me, I'm just not sure what we're saying when we use it. Whose God? Which God? Your God? Should I be thanking him too? Or It, I mean. Or, um...the Life Force of the Universe, or something? See, I'm still confused.

The next term goes hand in hand with these questions. It is one that, on first notice, I could not attach to what we do here. I couldn't place it; I didn't understand how it was relevant. What I mean is, I don't really get the meaning of Worship Service in a Unitarian context. I put this to my interviewees:

A Unitarian:

"I don't think of this as a worship service. I'm interested in the term, in a historical or cultural way; it's been with humans forever. The idea of being thankful is very good, and I'm always thankful after I go to church. But I picture someone bowing down, kneeling. There's something about that word, like there's something way above you that you have to be looking up to."

And this was echoed by others

"It's not worship unless you have an object or some presence to be worshipping. Unless it's just the earth itself."

Another Unitarian:

"We don't worship anything. It's not an appropriate word."

Okay, well, fair enough. I mean, we don't collectively worship anything, in particular, right? We might individually be worshipping something; I don't know.

I found a dichotomy really interesting in the answers that I got. On the one hand, I got this:

"Worshipping anyone or anything is offensive. Most gods punish people, destroy worlds, and send people to hell. They are capricious, vain and cruel. To worship them is to surrender your moral duty. It doesn't matter if you are worshipping a person or a god; you're not thinking critically anymore."

I find that response reasonable. If what you picture when you hear the word worship is the act bowing down to a tyrant, subjugating yourself in that way out of fear, then it seems that one ought to reject the term.

However, I also heard this:

"I do think it's a positive word. It's a good experience to praise something outside yourself. Devotion is something that a lot of people don't experience anymore and I think it's a valuable thing."

and this:

"When I think of worship, I think of prayer to a higher power and that's simply a matter of raising our awareness and creating better energy within ourselves and others in the community. It's not necessarily linked to 'faith in God.'"

So, where do all of these explorations take us? Well, to be honest, after having had all these conversations with people about the terms, I'm starting to feel a little better about them. First of all, at least I know it's not just me hearing these things in these words. Like, I'm not crazy or anything.

I also think that just the act of discussing them puts them somewhere else. When we are allowed to muse and debate over the meanings of these terms, they sort of lose some of that negative connotation that they once had for me; they lose some of their power. The very act of questioning them and being allowed to redefine them; the total experience of having heard multiple interpretations of them, pulls them away from whatever dictatorial and traditional authority they were supposed to be related to.

I hope that Unitarians don't take that for granted, because when you get to come here and you get to have a community that supports the asking of these questions, well,

God seems less scary, whether you believe in that or not. People who go to church are less scary, because it isn't about that whole judgement thing. Religion is a forum within which to have a conversation, not a doctrine, and to worship is just to appreciate being here.

There was one final question that I put to my panel. It was:

“Is there a difference between being a Religious person, vs. a Spiritual one?”

I wonder whether we are really religious liberals, or spiritual liberals. I'm sure there is plenty of room for argument. Here's what my panel had to say:

“Spiritual sounds more positive; I'm a little bit intimidated by people who call themselves religious. If you're spiritual, there's a greater chance that you have spent more time on your own critically thinking about God and what spirituality means to you.”

“Religious means someone who is part of a structured organization that believes in specific rules and guidelines. Spiritual means you don't buy in; you create your own beliefs. I don't want to judge people, but I do have a specific picture in my mind when I hear these words. We all have our preconceived notions of what they are about.”

“Spiritual is a more positive term. It's all about personal growth and awareness. Religious is about dogma and doctrine; not truth. When you become spiritual you are searching for truth, you want to grow. It's about following rules vs. growing as individuals.”

“People who talk about themselves being spiritual aren't usually religious. They're usually more 'woo-y'; new-agey. They believe stuff; they're not sure what it is. Powers, forces. Non-personified mysticism.”

“Religious seems to imply more of a subservient thing. Spiritual is more Unitarian: seeking the spiritual side of your life, wanting to take care of that, nurture that, but not in a way that is too structured or bossy. Spiritual might be the opposite of religious.”