1. The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided.(1) Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.

But the Lord of Ages wisely and patiently follows out the plan of grace on our behalf, sinners that we are. In recent times more than ever before, He has been rousing divided Christians to remorse over their divisions and to a longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians. This movement toward unity is called "ecumenical."

We can’t minister to everyone. But we use that as an excuse too often when we turn off or turn away people who are hungry for a religious community where theological reflection and study are central to the life of the church, not a special program for the “religious types” among them. We use that “we can’t please everyone” excuse when we turn off and turn away droves of people who want a worship experience that doesn’t tip toe around the question of God and doesn’t present God as a college lecture topic for dissection or historical analysis. To paraphrase the old joke about Unitarians, we’re still inviting people to sit and hear the lecture on Heaven instead of walking through the door to the place and the experience.

You know what no one wants to hear any more? The lecture about how the historical Jesus probably didn’t really go this place or say that thing. They don’t care. They can watch the History Channel at home.

As we gather in community this coming week [General Assembly], I hope we will talk about how to minister to more people. Not to “like-minded” people and not this demographic or that demographic. But human beings however they come. Not politically liberal enough or enlightened human beings we have hand-picked to welcome because we think they “share similar values,” which I consider a slightly ominous phrase when applied to people we haven’t yet met, as it sounds like an attempt to control the work of the Holy Spirit that is the force that gathers the gathered church.
On Being an Ecumenical Atheist

A Unitarian Universalist walks into a cathedral. A really big cathedral. Ok, St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. Engaging the welcoming clergy in the nave, he comments upon the majesty of the edifice and inquires about mainstream Protestantism in England. Preliminary introductions include his training by the Christian Brothers and the Jesuits, his current status as a Unitarian Universalist and spouse of a UU minister, and his devotion to an evidence based view of the universe, to which the Anglican cleric responds, “Why, you’re an ecumenical atheist.” This incisive description gave the American tourist pause, precipitating substantial reflection. Inasmuch as this odd juxtaposition of words is not common parlance, explanation and explication seemed imperative. What is an ecumenical atheist? If such a creature exists, what traits might accompany this posture? And if there is some validity in the appellation, what relevance might there be to his avowed faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism? From the River Thames to the mighty Maumee, these thoughts now flow.

Ecumenical: The Short Version

The terms beg definition. Derived from the Greek oikoumen meaning ‘to inhabit’ and the Latin oecumenicus, ‘belonging to the whole inhabited world,’ ecumenical has multiple meanings. Contemporary usage refers more to the Christian Church, especially the view that promotes potential cohesion within that tradition, a Protestant movement dating back to the 1800s (Ecumenical, n.d.). More recently, the work of Vatican II and Pope John XXIII, popularized this theme within the Roman Catholic tradition. For our purposes today, influenced by the faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism, it is fitting to embrace the more expansive definition. From this perspective, ecumenical encompasses a larger view, acknowledging the fact that throughout human history, our ancestors concocted stories and traditions allowing them to make sense of an apparently senseless world.

Atheist: The Short Version

The term ‘atheist,’ on the other hand, is fraught with volatile connotations. ‘Atheos,’ a Greek word meaning ‘without gods’ or ‘godless’ has a negative valence in its very construction. A second definition describes the noun version as “one who practically denies the existence of a God by disregard of moral obligation to Him, a godless man” (Atheist, n.d.). The pejorative nature of these depictions needs little elaboration. Among the least desirable traits for a presidential candidate in the upcoming 2016 elections, the latest Pew Forum found that 53% of Americans would not vote for an individual who claimed not to believe in God with only 5% finding this stance to be preferable (For 2016 hopefuls, Washington Experience Could Do More Harm than Good, n.d.).

In Letter to a Christian Nation, Sam Harris offers a different take on describing oneself as an atheist. Noting that humans do not describe themselves as non-astrologists, non-alchemists or non-tooth fairy believers, he maintains: “Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs” (Harris, 2006). In fact, he pointedly notes that all religious believers are atheists when it comes to religions other than their own. An atheist just goes one religion further. True scientist that he is, Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, indicates that it is impossible to declare himself 100% atheistic, but he can claim that the existence of a deity is highly improbable, based upon the current evidence at our disposal (Dawkins, 2006). While Daniel Dennett, the Tufts philosopher, floated the ill-fated term of the Brights to capture the position of those who did not ascribe to a personal deity, the semantic quandary persists (Dennett, 2003). Given the failure to date of a catchy term for one who does not believe in Superhuman Agents such as Zeus, Apollo, Mohammed, or Yahweh, ‘atheist’ will suffice for the purposes of discussion today.
Ecumenical Atheist: The Short Version

What, then, is an ecumenical atheist? This is an individual compelled by facts, evidence, and reason while remaining open to the merits and demerits of many belief systems, including those represented by the world’s great religions, past and present. Endeavoring to lead a moral and principled life guided by not only the Golden Rule but by kindness, this person negotiates the terrain between being responsible to self and responsible to the community. Keenly aware of the brevity of a human life on this planet, the ecumenical atheist savor the holiness of each moment. Heaven is here on earth and so is hell, facts to which most humans who have lived long enough can attest. The arrival at this position for this speaker was not a singular Pauline moment; no bolt of lightning, no fall from a horse. It was a process occurring over many years, not unlike the paths of many Unitarian Universalists and others who have wrestled with the big questions in life. Raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, even this sometimes strident secular humanist once journeyed through the Old and New Testaments. This atheist was made, not born. In fact, some scholars in the cognitive science of religion, including Justin Barrett in his book, Born Believers, claim that it is impossible to be born an atheist: reference here Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or wearing the lucky Michigan jersey in the fall. The human brain is predisposed to perceive patterns, even when none exist, and similarly to ascribe agency to events: the devil made me do it, Jehovah saved me, Allah willed it. Scrutinizing one’s own beliefs and where they originated is a daunting and formidable task that typically takes time, hard work and more than a dash of angst if one is paying attention. A further parsing of the term, ecumenical atheist, seems appropriate at this point.

Ecumenical: The Long Version

Being ecumenical, even if confined to the strict definition of the hoped-for unity among Christian believers, calls for an openness to a host of divergent paths that originated from a common source, the Judaeo-Christian tradition. While the Reformation inaugurated the movement away from the Roman Church toward a multiplicity of paths, ecumenism speaks to a recognition of the commonality of those denominational fractures. The breath of fresh air emanating from the Second Vatican Council included a willingness to move away from rigid insularity to an embrace of and respect for fellow travelers inspired by the teachings of the Christ. As delivered in this morning’s first reading, the opening statement of the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio) states: “The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council” (Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio), 1965) Decades later, Pope John Paul II, often caricatured as dogmatic in his orthodoxy, took this position in his encyclical, Ut Unum Sint, “Thus it is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of ‘appendix’ which is added to the Church’s traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does” (II, 2005). Rather than focusing upon the many divisions within Christianity, there emerged a ‘big tent’ orientation that highlighted the shared similarities among followers of the Eastern Orthodox and Western Reformation fissions.

The beauty of the Unitarian Universalist tradition is that risky venture into the more expansive territory of the value and worth of a host of religious and non-religious influences. Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, co-minister at West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church, poetically declares, “Throughout history, we [Unitarian Universalists] have moved to the rhythms of mystery and wonder, prophecy, wisdom, teachings from ancient and modern sources, and nature herself” (Rolenz, n.d.). From this vantage point, being ecumenical as a Unitarian Universalist encompasses an even bigger tent than that of the noble effort of the Second Vatican Council. All of the world’s religions, including the Jewish and Christian teachings, secular and humanist teachings, together with earth-centered traditions are potential sources for guidance, inspiration, and personal and communitarian transformation. Whereas a common thread throughout all religions is the fervent notion that
we are right and everyone else is wrong, Unitarian Universalists maintain that we are all a little bit right and we may all be a little bit wrong.

This remarkable expansiveness calls us to a respect for and the broadest appreciation of the spiritual journeys of the entirety of human kind throughout history. Tolerance of this sort implies the recognition that our entire species struggles to make sense of an often incomprehensible cosmos, arriving at different conclusions, of course, but driven by the same search for meaning and ache for understanding. Being an ecumenical UU entails not only the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our own congregations as the 3rd Principle articulates, but to an acceptance and encouragement that extends to those beyond our congregational walls. Given our respective routes to this faith tradition and the ongoing arduous nature of that effort provides us with an appreciation for the endeavors of those, like us, who wish to find meaning and direction on this tiny planet.

Implicit in this unique view of humankind, the ecumenist within Unitarian Universalism is less preoccupied with the content of a particular set of beliefs and more aware of how those beliefs function within the lives of individuals, families, and societies. Transcending the kinship ties that held early hominid groups of 100 to 150 together, religion binds unrelated people together, a primary function according to E.O. Wilson in Social Conquest of Earth (Wilson, 2013). Advantageous to survival, this evolutionary adaptation permitted this innately social species to occupy every niche on the planet, more efficiently prepared to distinguish in-group from out-group and to come together in moments of threat. Additionally, the ecumenical soul realizes the tremendous solace and comfort found in many traditions, allowing for enhanced functioning in even the gravest of circumstances.

Some of you may recall that gentle and unpretentious bookkeeper, Antoinette Tuff, employed at a school in Georgia (Severson & Blinder, 2013). A deeply devout Christian who had engaged in the practice of centering herself in the Lord under the tutelage of her pastor and fellow congregants, Ms. Tuff was singularly prepared for an unexpected crisis. When a young man suffering from severe emotional impairment walked into her school, armed with an arsenal of automatic weapons and prepared to kill, this religious woman prayed, centered herself as she had learned, and then thoughtfully and calmly engaged the would-be shooter. She shared some of her own life’s struggles, treating him as a fellow human being with similar life travails. He listened and he spoke to her. And he relinquished his weapons. This woman’s core beliefs about the world gave her the strength and the courage to encounter trauma in a thoughtful, healing, and life-saving manner. Therein lies the best of how a religion can function in the life of one person. It matters not WHAT she believes, in the eyes of an ecumenical UU, but it matters THAT she believes, propelling her to behave in a transcendent manner that graced all those around her.

This recognition of the value of diverse religious beliefs extends to all societies across the globe. From time immemorial, the tenets of multiple peoples have led to an enduring legacy in the arts, in music, in literature. From the great cathedrals, mosques, synagogues and temples that dot the earth to the holy texts which often bear analogous tales and moral codes, the believing human brain and relationship system have added to the beauty inherent in other parts of nature. Moreover, social justice movements have been populated with not only rabbis, ministers, priests, nuns, shamans, and imams, but with the faithful. The women’s rights movement, abolition, the civil rights efforts, the peace marches, and those who would stand on the side of love have all contributed to a more just and equitable world, drawing from their respective religious traditions. An ecumenical UU welcomes this common effort and joins the fray.
Atheist: The Long Version

Being an atheist who is ecumenical is part of that free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This principle does not call all Unitarian Universalists to the position of atheism as there is indeed a diversity of beliefs within our congregations. According to the UUA, approximately 37% of UUs characterize themselves as either religious or somewhat religious while 58% identify as being either secular or somewhat secular. Regardless of where a person falls on that continuum, the Principles and Purposes underline the personal responsibility of each congregant to not only forge their own path but also to encourage others to honestly do likewise, understanding that each of us may arrive at dramatically different positions on how the world works and what it all means. There is a respect for those differences and a tolerance for a plethora of paths despite the convictions of one’s own particular stance. There are not only many roads to Rome but also many roads to Boston (and beyond). Pagans, Christians, deists, theists, Buddhists, Jews, agnostics, atheists et al. can all worship together within our churches and congregations challenged by the task of finding our own ways and liberated by the openness of this communitarian effort. E pluribus unum.

For the atheist, the preponderance of evidence results in the conclusion that the gods and goddesses do not exist. However, the universe, the cosmos, this galaxy, and this earth exist, guided by laws and principles that the human did not orchestrate but that the human can possibly divine. No need to worry, however, for the mysteries will remain, yielding their facts slowly and over eons. Curious beings that we are, the drive to explore the outermost regions of the known and unknown will propel this species into uncharted territory resulting in the discarding of antiquated theories and explanations as new evidence accumulates. In a statement attributed to Max Planck, “Science progress is slow. One funeral at a time.” Thus, the atheist is keenly aware of the ignorance within self while striving to remain open to the novel.

One critique of religions in general is that they are closed systems, immune to new evidence (or at least slow to acknowledge facts). After all, it was in the year 2000 that the Roman Catholic Church forgave Galileo, indicating that he was correct, after all. This speaker has opined that few, if any, Muslims would accept the fact that Mohammed was not a prophet subsumed into the afterlife upon the yet-to-happen discovery of his tomb, complete with DNA. The same could be said if applied to Jesus Christ. But let’s turn this on its head, for a moment. If compelling evidence emerged that the prophet Jesus was indeed the Son of God, what effect would this have on the ecumenical atheist? The world of science is open to new information; scientists themselves, however, being members of this humble species, are not always open to new information. Just as ancestors throughout history have relinquished their favorite concepts and theories when confronted with incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, the authentic atheist would need to reconsider and revise this stance. Facts trump dogmatism, especially for one who claims to be persuaded by the evidence.

A dogmatic atheist is not synonymous with an ecumenical atheist. Having arrived at this position via painstaking soul searching and rigorous exploration from a host of disciplines, this individual is solid but not rigid in this position. When some degree of clarity surfaces, this person can confidently stake out a belief system that works in his world, leaving little time to defend that position from the onslaughts of others nor attack the positions of those who think quite differently. Realizing the tremendous responsibility that accompanies this often lonely effort, he can appreciate the common attempts by his fellow travelers to also find meaning, purpose, and direction.

While ecumenical atheism is open and tolerant, it is also discriminating and discerning. Keenly aware of the beauties and wisdom inherent in multiple faith traditions, there is also a recognition of the horrors contained in many holy texts and the brutality exacted upon other humans in the name of a deity who always happens to be in the camp of the adherent. The Inquisition, the Crusades, honor killings, genital mutilations and the recent
public beheadings by fervent believers are proof positive of the evil that can ensue from those who claim to be directly inspired by Divine Fiat. The treatment of women in many religions, perhaps even our own, gives rise to a voice that invokes justice for all, embracing the inherent worth and dignity of every person as our 1st Principle boldly claims. Unafraid to speak to the vicissitudes wrought upon human kind in the name of religion, the ecumenical atheist is also cognizant of the fact that religion in and of itself is not the sole repository of evil in the world. Without religion, humans would behave similarly, finding justification for both the blessings and the curses that we exact upon each other.

Equating an atheist with an amoral nihilist, a hedonist, or anarchist who believes that anything goes is misguided and inaccurate. As Darwin and his heirs have illustrated, humans are not only predisposed to compete but also to cooperate (de Waal, 1996). Evidence of compassion and the Golden Rule proliferate throughout nature among beings who do not wear yarmulkes, crucifixes, flaming chalices or burkas. While a set of Ten Commandments and Sharia Law is sufficient for some, offering a prescribed set of behaviors allowing for order and social control within society, it is not necessary for decency and a respect for the common good to flourish. Godless beings can be kind to one another, avoiding murder and mayhem without attributing their actions to the fear of an invisible Superhuman Agent waiting to exact punishment in the present or the hereafter. An atheist strives to do the right thing, simply because it is the right thing to do. For the ecumenical atheist, this IS all there is, a marvelous moment to embrace, to inject with meaning, and to celebrate however long or short it may be. This awareness yields a unique opportunity coupled with a weighty responsibility to leave a legacy and some footprints. Unperturbed by the apparently infinite universes of which he is a speck of stardust as Carl Sagan so eloquently stated (Sagan, 1980), this successful survivor of millions of generations of winners in the reproductive game of life yearns to make his circle a little more connected, a little more whole. Impossible, perhaps? Noble, indeed.

Ecumenical Atheism and Unitarian Universalism

In what faith tradition can an ecumenical atheist find a true home, then? Unitarian Universalism stands alone in its welcoming embrace of those who would embark upon this journey. In this morning’s second reading, the Rev. Victoria Weinstein’s challenge to all UUs rings especially true, calling us to greater self-examination of our beliefs and adherence to our core principles. Freely, an ecumenical atheist can stand inside these churches and congregations, celebrating life, worshipping not with like-minded souls but with fellow seekers with very different beliefs. Unshaken by these disparities, the ecumenical atheist relishes the emancipation of ideas, continuously endeavoring to be a responsible human being while laboring in a community. As G.K. Chesterton noted, “We are all in the same boat, in a stormy sea. And we owe each other a terrible loyalty” (Chesterton, n.d.).

Paradoxically, our differences do not divide us but bring us together in this unique conglomeration of souls trying to find a way through the morass. Thus, we Christians, Buddhists, Jews, pagans, Muslims, agnostics, atheists, struggle together, worship together, comfort each other together, and do our part to make this world a community of peace, liberty, and justice for all, as our 6th Principle states. Dr. Murray Bowen, the father of family psychotherapy, said it well: “You have inherited a lifetime of tribulation, everybody has inherited it. Take it over, make the most of it. And when you have decided you know the right way, do the best that you can with it” (Wylie, 1991). Being an ecumenical atheist in and of itself does not make one wiser, more moral, or more mature. Humbled by the grandeur of the universe and the sacredness of life of all species, he trudges along the way striving to keep an open mind and compassionate heart. This ecumenical atheist has found his own right way. The road here was not easy. It continues. And it is certainly worth it.

So may it be.


