

## The Religious Counterculture

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All Souls NYC

I'm not easily star struck, but there is one minor celebrity whom I have a kind of a crush on: Mayim Bialik. She's in the cast of *The Big Bang Theory* and long ago starred in the show *Blossom*. I have never watched either of these shows, but that's beside the point. It's not her acting performance that I admire so much. It's her performance of her values. She has a PhD in neuroscience from UCLA and now uses her expertise to teach science classes as part of homeschooling children in her community. She is a vegan who says that she prepares vegan food for her family to teach her kids to care for the earth. And she is a modern orthodox Jew who keeps the Sabbath, keeps kosher (so it's kosher vegan food), and even tries to observe the Jewish modesty laws in her dress. The latter, as you can imagine, is no small feat for a woman who makes a living in Hollywood.

The modesty issue came to a head last month as she prepared to attend the Emmy awards. She needed to find a dress that covered her elbows and knees and collarbone and was not too tight, and, of course, was absolutely gorgeous enough for the red carpet. The quest for this perfect dress became very public as she wrote about it in her various online columns. She called the quest *Operation Hot and Holy*.

We may disagree with a tradition that requires this kind of modesty (although let me point out that the same modesty laws apply to men). But you've got to admire someone who takes her religious values so seriously that she is willing to stand up to *intense social pressure*. If women in our culture normally feel pressure to dress in revealing clothing, the pressure must be tenfold in Hollywood and a hundredfold at big public industry events like the Emmys. But she did it – operation hot and holy: mission accomplished – and afterwards the blogosphere was bursting with women, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, thanking her for her courage in so publicly contesting the cultural rules of how women are supposed to look.

Do we Unitarian Universalists similarly experience a tension between our religious values and the values of the secular world? If not, why not? If so, how do we resolve it? It's clear to me that there should be tension. There

should be *enormous* tension. Until the world is as it should be – until all wars have ended, until no child is hungry, until we are living gently on the earth, until power is shared, and until all voices are heard – until that day, we should not be able to fit comfortably into this world. We should feel this tension in every decision we make. We should feel it when we shop at the grocery store, when we watch TV, when we go to work, when we speak to a child. The questions of to what extent and in what ways we should participate in the dominant culture should keep us up at night. As sweet as it should feel to be a Unitarian Universalist within these walls, it should be hard to be a Unitarian Universalist beyond these walls.

Now, this is not just my idea. Religious communities have almost always started out as countercultural phenomena. Religious teachers across the millennia have exhorted their followers to stop striving after the false idols of the secular world. Instead, come together in loving community and connect with God. The early Christian community described in the Book of Acts is a perfect example. The story goes that people were so inspired by the teachings of Jesus that they completely broke from their social context. It says:

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... A great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

They “devoted themselves to fellowship” and broke bread together “with glad and sincere hearts.”

Whether this literally happened or not is irrelevant. Note that this is Christian Scripture. This is what many Christians believe was an unalloyed expression of Jesus’ teachings – the first human foray into building a Christian utopia “on earth as it is in Heaven.” Being a Christian was not initially seen as compatible with living a normal life, working a normal job, or even owning land. To be a Christian was to have an entirely different understanding of what it means to be a human. On a political level, these early Christians were not directly trying to change the policies of the state but rather they were asserting an alternative vision of how people can live together in community. Rev. Jacqui Lewis at Middle Collegiate Church calls this “rehearsing the reign of God.”

By my analysis, this is exactly what’s going on in Zuccotti Park right now. The Occupy Wall Street protesters are not delivering unified demands or messages because in a very real way, the medium *is* their message. Their

protest embodies a communitarian ethos – reclaiming a piece of private land, declaring it public by their presence, and living on it together in a way that intentionally rehearses their ideals. They are doing it imperfectly to be sure, but they are struggling to get it right.

They resist hierarchy and try to make sure that even the quietest voices are heard. The minutes from one of their meetings notes that they intentionally elevate traditionally marginalized voices and voices that have not been heard from. They study a lot – a free library of donated books gets used constantly. There are classes taught by volunteers in everything from economics to non-violent conflict resolution – all to help people reframe their thinking from outside of the dominant paradigms. And they break bread together. The food is mostly vegetarian or vegan, all donated by people in the larger community, free and available to everyone, and somehow it feeds almost 1000 people per day, loaves and fishes style. Although participants might disagree, I see Occupy Wall Street as a fundamentally religious movement in that it's struggling to embody the beloved community – asserting a vision of the world as it *should be* in the very midst of the world as it is.

The “rehearsal of the reign of God” that constituted the early Christian church has reappeared repeatedly in different forms, through different religions, at different times throughout history. The Occupy movement is just one current instantiation of it. But, sadly, the trajectory of these movements is almost always one of decline – the commitment fades, the momentum fizzles, the teachings ossify. Over time, people find it too hard to stand so alienated from the lives they once knew. The sacrifices are too great. And, of course, we all want to be able to look fabulous walking down the red carpet at the Emmys. Liberal religion loses its radical edge as its institutions become ensconced in mainstream society.

James Luther Adams, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister and divinity school professor, had these harsh words to say about what he saw as Unitarians' slide down this familiar slope:

The element of commitment, of change of hearts, of decision so much emphasized in the Gospels, has been neglected by religious liberalism, and that is the prime source of its enfeeblement. We liberals are largely an uncommitted and therefore self-frustrating people. Our first task, then, is to restore to liberalism its own dynamic and its own prophetic genius... *A holy community must be a militant community* with its own explicit faith; and this explicit faith cannot be engendered without disciplines that shape the ethos of the group and that issue in the criticism of the society and of the ‘religious’ community itself.

He may be overstating the case to say that we are “largely” uncommitted – so many of us do so much good in the world. (All Souls even had a loaves and fishes moment at Monday Night Hospitality this week. They served a sit-down dinner to 312 guests with music on the Steinway and flowers at every table. There was enough food for many to have seconds.) But that the kind of commitment Adams is talking about is a pretty radical kind of commitment *on the part of the community as a whole*. He uses the terms “holy community” and “militant community” in the same breath. He is talking about a kind of community, like the early Christian church and like Occupy Wall Street, that is dramatically different from the surrounding culture; sustained by the power of love and fundamentally incompatible with a world where poverty, oppression, and violence can exist. He is talking about a religious counterculture.

If the community of All Souls looks in the mirror, do we see the religious counterculture that we ought to be if we really believe the things we say we believe ...the inherent worth of all people, the interdependence of all existence, the goal of world community with justice for all? If we really believe that we all emerge from the same source and share the same destiny, *are we meeting the obligations generated by those beliefs?* I’d say we’re not there yet. One way to put it is, most of us act like Unitarian Universalists, but not like really religious Unitarian Universalists.

What if everyone in this room were to become *really religious* Unitarian Universalists? What if, for example, starting today, those of us who have high-paying jobs refused to accept a salary that was more than seven times what the lowest-paid worker makes in our organizations? And explained to the stunned custodian, “It’s because I’m a really religious Unitarian Universalist.” What if, starting today, you only ate food that was sustainably grown, humanely raised, and for which the workers who produced it were paid a living wage, even if that ruled out most of the food you currently eat? And you explained to your outraged children, “It’s because in this family, we’re really religious Unitarian Universalists.” What if, starting today, straight couples refused to get married until there was marriage equality for everyone in the country? And they said to their shocked parents, “It’s because we are really religious Unitarian Universalists.”

This is not a call for moral perfection but rather for us all to think of our religion as central to our lives. We will be imperfect and this church will be imperfect and there will be tension as we negotiate with our desire to simply participate as normal people in this society. We'll hear ourselves saying, "Can't I just enjoy a friggin' cheeseburger for God's sake?!" We naturally want to succeed in this world. We want to make money, we want to have fun, we want to feel accepted. We want to be not only holy, but hot too! (Even Mayim Bialik mused aloud about whether God would mind that much if maybe just her left arm were exposed...) The struggle is a holy struggle. The important thing is not that we be perfect but that we *engage with the tension*. And the key is to do it together.

We're not there yet. But I think All Souls has the potential to become a community where we do this work together. It can become a laboratory where we experiment with our highest ideals; a Petri dish in which we grow our own culture. Together we can speak our own language. Together we can rehearse the beloved community. Together we can break bread with food that embodies our compassion for the earth. Together we can be radically inclusive. Together we can expose false idols. Together, we can practice honesty and compassion, sensitivity and generosity. Together we can assert a holy vision of the world as it should be in the very midst of the world as it is.