

**Faithless: Demanding a Secular Revival of Reason**  
**Ann Withorn Winter 2001.**

Since I (mainly) have stopped wanting to shock people just to prove how radical I am, I now keep quiet when well meaning speakers made inclusive remarks like: “we all worship god in our own ways,” or “of course we must respect each other’s faith and our right to different beliefs.” But now, even in supposedly liberal Boston, such comments are increasingly thrown out as “unifiers” in all sorts of public gatherings. Rarely do I respond back: “well no, actually we don’t all believe, or worship, or even intellectually respect faith in god and belief in other supernatural fantasies.”

After all, as a long time activist I have long known to “start where the people are” and to silence secular doubts about people who make nonsensical god-statements. No matter how gently I craft my atheistic challenge to the “exclusivity” of god presumptions, I know that even usual allies will object. My comments are pronounced “unhelpful” at best, “self-indulgent” and “intolerant” at worst. So I usually keep quiet -- after all, there are always “bigger issues” at stake. (I have even learned much from AIAnon, despite identifying my "Higher Power" as a dog I very much love.) But since religious fundamentalist tenets are now allowed as the legitimate, then being only the “other side,” needed for balance in public discourse, is getting harder and harder to accept.

So when notice arrived about an International Conference of Secular Humanists, “Toward New Enlightenment,” to be held in Buffalo October 27-30, I made immediate plans to get there. And indeed, I felt right at home among the 800+ free thinkers who chose to attend this joint conference sponsored by the Center for Free Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanists.

Most were academics and emeritus academics (the average hair color was gray, if there was hair to see at all) from over 20 countries. Many were scientists, including international prize winning biologists, physicists, geologists, environmentalists and social scientists like Richard Dawkins,...Others were the iconoclastic curmudgeons with whom I have always proudly identified – the watercolorist who argues with book club members about truth, the gay public school teacher from the cornfields of the Midwest, the feminist Canadian politician worried about backlash. It was wonderful.

At the conference we were together in big plenaries, listening to lecturers and panels of experts. Ordinarily my anti-authoritarian self would have objected to the format. But, in fact, most speakers knew their stuff and all comfortably offered elaborated a public intellectual critique of faith, belief, pseudo-science religion and god that would be provocative even for most activists at progressive gatherings.

Much of the conference focused on the scientists’ deep dismay at the credence given to fundamentalist attacks on scientists, on natural history, evolution and on scientific method itself. Some in the audience, like the engineer whose work was designing heart replacement parts, attended just to assure themselves they weren’t crazy, that the work

they had devoted their life to was still valued. Speakers were there to examine all the flaws with “intelligent design” and other supernatural myths. There were impressive, clear presentations about the origins of the universe, the history of cosmology and about the science of brain behavior, not presented defensively but just to remind us all of the value of scientific knowledge – and the critical questions still out there to address. As one speaker complained after summarizing current scientific debates, “these are the important questions about evolutionary theory. We need to be talking about them – not debating with fundamentalist ignorance.”

Along with the scientists, and often overlapping with them, were the activists, who came to rally the forces of reason. This group (with whom I identified), led by writers like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and others, were more than dismayed. They passionately and carefully explained both the dangers posed by fundamentalist religionist thinking – Christian, Jewish and Islamic -- and the economic, political and social power behind their pseudo-academic “institutes” and lobbying groups. Many kept explaining that were weren’t fighting “ignorance” but well financed forces of the political and religious Right that were given full reign by cowardly journalists and politicians. It was wonderful to be in large banquet rooms and auditoriums where hundreds of people were not afraid either to make jokes about fundamentalist illogic AND to share their very real fears about the very real power of those united by faith under what Richard Dawkins call the “god delusion”.

Finally, there was a cohort of old-line atheists, free thinkers and intellectual libertarians. Their issues were less immediate, more philosophical. Many kept returning to religious texts in order to prove their fallacies, as they raised important current questions about what tolerance means in the face of dangerous “judgmental mystical thinking” of the religionists. I met many folks like this among the audience – proud auto-didact atheist school teachers from the cornfields of Illinois and watercolorists from the wetlands of Minnesota – people who reminded me of myself when I first discovered Bertrand Russell and found great joy in quoting him to my Southern fundamentalist family and classmates back at midcentury.

Indeed, much of what was great about meeting with so many non-believers was that the edge was off. It was not tense even when folks disagreed about whether any good scientist had to be an atheist (what about other good scientific colleagues who weren’t?). Or about how politically aggressive scientists needed to be (wasn’t it enough just to do good science? “I love my laboratory,” one distinguished scientist mourned, “”must I leave it for the soapbox?”). We felt safe in the fellowship of our doubt and disbelief.

In the midst of the good time had by all, however, there were some serious questions raised that all secular progressives must consider, now.

First, what does “tolerance” mean when religions turn nasty and dangerous?

Many speakers and audience members seemed torn about whether fundamentalist Islam, Christianity and Judaism were, in fact, the essential Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Is

“moderate” religion, as fundamentalists and many atheist argue, simply watered-down, lily-livered faith? There is a real debate here, of real importance.

The one thing, for me, that came out of the gathering was that fundamentalist Islam is just as bad as, but no worse than, fundamentalist Christianity and Judaism. Some at the conference – like Sam Harris -- didn’t seem to agree. But what they take as the particular dangers of contemporary Islamist thought seems to me more of a case of historic situation. The Reformation, the Inquisition and the Crusades were bloody and genocidal in their time. As was Judaism of the Old Testament.

But today the modernization of global “development” finds greater threat from the religionists of Islam -- and so seems to avoid objected to how badly other religions have behaved and believed in the past (and are also doing now)

Tolerance is a long lasting and large philosophical/political question. The materialist left has been learning, correctly, to be more respectful of cultural differences, while still bringing anti-racism and women’s rights to the strategic fore. But the old question of how to be tolerant of those who are intolerant of you remains. And, after the intense immersion in the dangers of religion I too feel forced to think and act more carefully.

Similarly, the rise of religious fundamentalism everywhere makes me wonder if the separation of church and state as practiced and preached here in the USA is more like some kind of twisted “don’t ask don’t tell” logic.

Finally the conference raised one large question for secularists that was not fully faced – the breadth of our appeal and power. The rationalism and materialism of so much science and atheism is still led by a grouping of predominantly older white men of means. There was real attention about how to attract young people – with a group significantly headquartered in the deep South. But less talk about how to directly counter the powerful push to separate Christian young people from the “idealism” of grassroots religious organizing.

Yes there were strong women there – but at least 80% of the speakers and the experts were men. A few speakers really tried to bring gender and race into the conversation , but still does seem to be harder to come out as a female or black atheist, for reasons that should have been more discussed.

Still, the gathering of 800 participants – and no hecklers -- relieved much of my building need to voice frustration in explosive ways. Reminded of how big and old the task of challenging “religionists” is, I now have more examples of how to respond. Most important, I have been reminded that lots of people are out there who also “just don’t get the god thing,” as one conference speaker put it. It is comforting to know this, especially as the careful elaboration of how much ground has been lost to unreason is frightening and activating.

Submitted as a "report back" to some occasional newsletter of local Boston secular humanists . No record of when or how it was published exists.