



On Being a UU Sceptic

John DiLeo © 17 January 2021

Today, I'm going to spend some time talking mostly about myself. These musings put me in mind of the Talking Heads song lyric: "And I think to myself / well...how did I get here?" Today, as I stand before you, I'm comfortable calling myself a UU Sceptic. Even just a couple of years ago, that wasn't the case...

I was born into a non-practicing Christian family. My father – the youngest of 14 children in an Italian immigrant family in Jersey City, New Jersey – had been raised Roman Catholic and was active in the Church through his teens. He was excommunicated at 21, for choosing to marry my mother, a non-Catholic, after being forbidden to do so by his family and their parish priest.

My mother was descended from English, Irish, and German immigrant lines and grew up in the Episcopal church, also in Jersey City. She was the third of 11 children and, interestingly, wasn't the only daughter to end up marrying a Catholic boy.

For reasons I never thought to ask about, my parents were married in a nearby United Methodist church, rather than my mother's home church. From then until I was about ten years old, my family was largely unchurched. All three of my siblings were baptised – at that same United Methodist church in Jersey City. When I was born many years later, the family had moved to eastern Connecticut, so I was baptised at the local United Methodist church *there*. [Side note: my brother eventually became a United Methodist minister, served as the pastor of that very church, and presided over my mother's funeral there.]

Throughout my early childhood, church wasn't part of my life. Occasionally, I would go to church with a friend or relative. I would be sent off to Sunday School class, where "miraculous" Bible stories were recited as plain fact and everyone accepted their truth and authority without question. Although I never professed any sort of faith, I also considered the existence of the Christians' God and the truth of the Bible to be fact – because everyone around me did.

When I was 11, I started attending a local Episcopal church. I began serving as an Acolyte (an "altar boy"), which I continued through high school and college. As an adult, I became an active Churchman, elected to serve on my parish's Vestry (its management committee), and even getting elected to the Diocesan Council (*very* roughly equivalent to being on the ANZUUA Board).

In fact, I was so *into* serving in the church that I applied to enter a three-year training program leading to ordination as a permanent Deacon in the church. I wasn't accepted into that program. In retrospect, I think the selection committee could see something I hadn't yet realised myself.

You might have noticed in I never said anything about my *faith* – because I didn’t have any. I loved all the things I was doing in the church, and the pomp and ceremony it often entailed, but the church’s beliefs and doctrine were never something I came to believe – I *accepted* them, but never *believed* them.

As part of the collateral damage from the breakup of my first marriage, I walked away from my various roles and went back to being unchurched. The next 14 years were punctuated by a short stint at one UU Fellowship, but even that failed to “take,” and I couldn’t bring myself to become a UU officially. In retrospect, I’ve realised I couldn’t bring myself to declare affiliation with a group that says it’s OK to be a non-believer – even though I already knew in my heart I was one.

Just as [Berners-Lee mentioned in his essay](#), my attitude changed when Tess became pregnant with our first child. She had returned to full activity in the LDS church, in which she had been raised, and expressed her intention to raise our children in that faith. I decided it would be good for my family if I joined the church, so we could cooperate in that upbringing.

So, I did. I met with the missionaries, let them teach me all the things that new members needed to “know” and “believe,” and was baptised and confirmed in the LDS Church.

The origins and history of the [LDS church](#) – and, in particular, the life and death of its founder, Joseph Smith – include a great many fantastical stories, among them a fair few that have been objectively disproven. For me, that wasn’t much of an issue; I had chosen to *accept* the doctrine and beliefs of the church, even though I would never *believe* them. As part of my appointed “calling” in the church, I actually ended up teaching new and prospective members many the same fantastical things I’d been taught.

It was difficult, but not impossible, to reconcile my status as a non-believer – coupled with my core belief in honesty and integrity – with my role in teaching others church doctrine. I did it with weasel words - “the church teaches that” or “the story tells us that” – while being careful never to say “we know that” or “I believe that.”

Eventually, being a practicing non-believer wore on me, though. Partly because there was a continual fear that I’d be found out, called out, and forced to “get real or get out.” But, also partly because many of the *believers* with whom I had to interact were truly horrible human beings, making no effort to conceal decidedly non-Christian attitudes toward others, both within and outside the LDS church. In a few instances, local leaders even professed *as church doctrine* beliefs that went directly against the church’s actual teachings, not to mention common sense.

Just when I couldn’t stand being a part of it any longer, and was *seriously* contemplating a very loud and colourful exit, Tess reached her own breaking point for other reasons, and we walked away together.

Looking back, I’ve realised my persistent non-belief has a lot to do with my being a critical thinker and a sceptic; in other words. “smart enough to know better.”

Full disclosure: there were points in my life where I had profound and joyous spiritual experiences. Those experiences came *close* to igniting a spark of faith in me, but it never “took.” Inevitably, my desire to believe would run into some roadblock erected by my rational mind. I would raise one of those pesky “yes, but what about...?” questions to my then-current religious leader, and they would tell me I just needed to have more faith.

Yeah, nah. That just never worked for me.

At the same time, it’s been hard to erase my early programming. Despite our not being religious, nobody in my family ever *considered* the possibility that God doesn’t exist, or that Christianity isn’t *the* truth. That sort of early indoctrination is *incredibly* hard to overcome. And it pervades our lives: Growing up, how many of us ever even questioned the treatment, by our respective educational systems, of Judeo-Christian doctrine as “religion,” and other belief systems as “mythology”?

[By the way, writing this talk has helped me realise the continuing efforts to keep Christian indoctrination at bay in New Zealand’s public schools, in which our own David Hines is a key player, are so important.]

My nephew, Billy (that’s Dr. William Green to the rest of the world), posted something really insightful on Facebook the other day, and it sums up my struggle well. So, I’m going to quote portions of his post:

“I used to believe some pretty crazy things. I was a conservative Christian for about 25 years, and for quite a while I believed the Earth was only 5,000 years old. In order to believe that, you have to ignore a hell of a lot of evidence. And you have to do a lot of mental gymnastics. And you have to distrust a hell of a lot of very smart people who do not deserve your distrust.

...

“It’s scary to really look for truth, because it’s scary to be wrong. It means you might lose something. And you might. But you’ll gain so much more. You’ll gain a special freedom that comes only to those willing to admit they were wrong, even if they were wrong for a lifetime. It’s a special freedom that only comes to those who value truth over security. I’m not perfect in this, but it’s something I aspire to.

“My favorite quote from Carl Sagan sums it up: ‘For me, it is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring.’”

It’s only in the last few years that I’ve come to accept my own non-belief as valid. That struggle was as difficult as it was – at least, in part – because of how scary it is to admit “you were wrong for a lifetime,” as Billy said. I can only imagine how hard it was for him, having been a *true believer* for more than half his life.

Becoming a part of this fellowship, where non-believers and believers of all stripes are equally welcome and valued, has helped me on that journey.

As part of my research for this talk, I found a few writings by James A. Haught, who's been an atheist UU since the 1950s. In a 2019 piece, "Unitarians Are Mostly Skeptics," he wrote:

"America's largest assemblage of agnostic-atheist-skeptic-freethinker-godless-doubter-disbelievers may be within the Unitarian Universalist Association.

"UU is a tiny fringe with only 150,000 adult members, but they stand tall in science and intellectual circles. As a guess, I estimate that perhaps 140,000 of them doubt invisible gods, devils, heavens, hells, angels, demons and other magical entities alleged by standard churches.

...

"The humanist cohort of doubters evidently was drawn to UU because of its historic tradition as a sanctuary for thinkers who cannot swallow supernaturalism – a heritage encompassing many of the best minds throughout history. In the past, Unitarians led efforts to create humanist organizations and write humanist manifestos.

"Today, UU skeptics like me sometimes feel frustrated because our organization seems hesitant to fully acknowledge its disbelievers. It dances around timidly, mostly avoiding 'the elephant in the room.'"

(<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/daylightatheism/2019/05/unitarians-are-mostly-skeptics/>)

So, it seems the UU denomination – as a global organisation – still has some way to go toward fully embracing the sceptics and atheists comprising a plurality of its membership. I can live with that, as long as I feel welcome in my local fellowship – and I certainly do.

I'm still uncomfortable thinking of myself as an atheist. Sceptic, sure. Non-believer, you bet. But, taking on the label 'atheist' still feels a road too far. I'm also not, and don't expect I'll ever become, an "anti-theist" like Richard Dawkins – one who looks down on those who *have* faith in the God of their understanding. I recognise that religious faith *can* bring meaning and peace to people's lives, if those beliefs work for them, and I'm totally fine with that. On the other hand, intolerance of others, whether born of religion or anything else, has no place in the real world.

That takes me back to what I eventually realised is the real theme of my remarks – tolerance. On this point and in closing, there's a moment in *South Park* – of all things – that's really stuck with me. In the "All about Mormons?" episode in Season 7, an LDS family moves to South Park and their son Gary joins the boys' class. If I'm remembering correctly, the boys are in third grade, so they're around eight years old.

During the episode, Stan and his family are initially intrigued by how happy Gary's family is together, and want to know how they can have that, too. But, then, Gary's family tells one of those fantastical stories about the church's origins, which doesn't withstand even minor scrutiny. Stan is incredulous, and calls them all idiots for believing it.

The next morning, Gary confronts Stan, saying:

“Look, maybe us Mormons do believe in crazy stories that make absolutely no sense, and maybe Joseph Smith did make it all up, but I have a great life, and a great family, and I have the Book of Mormon to thank for that.

The truth is, I don't care if Joseph Smith made it all up, because what the church teaches now is loving your family, being nice, and helping people. And even though people in this town might think that's stupid, I still choose to believe in it.

All I ever did was try to be your friend, Stan, but you're so high and mighty you couldn't look past my religion and just be my friend back. You've got a lot of growing up to do, buddy.”

Yes, we do, Gary. Yes, we do.

After we close this morning, I ask those who are here in person to stick around, form into small groups, and discuss your thoughts on today's Discussion Questions.

Our questions today are:

- What are the truths that matter most to you now?
- How have they evolved as you've lived and learned?