

Love and Rockets. Love and Rockets? Some of you might be aware of the graphic novels under the same title by the Brothers Hernandez, with their lesbian heroines and their punk/sci-fi aesthetics... it's a great title, and one that links together a number of things I'll be talking about today. So I couldn't resist using it. But I must give credit where credit is due.

As Unitarian Universalists, we tend to have diverse and complex theological roots. Mine are pretty clear as these things go – there's a strong Daoist streak, flavored with lots of Buddhism. I spent many years spent immersed in indigenous thinking and ceremony. Philosophically, I'm deeply grounded in the Enlightenment, and I'm definitely in the non-theist camp. Although I have been known to invoke various deities in times of stress.

But upon closer examination, it turns out that I also have deep theological roots in speculative fiction. You could even say that some of my sacred texts are novels from that genre. Well, why not? Religion and possible futures were – and still are - deeply intertwined in many of these books.

In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Robert Heinlein imagined a religion founded by an Earthling raised by Martians. This new religion is a synthesis of several Earth religions, communitarian free love, and Martian physics. The novel is surprisingly sympathetic to all forms of religion, while retaining a critical eye towards them.

There is *Dune*, by Frank Herbert. On the world of Arakkis, the local religion is a mystical fusion of Zen and Sunni Islam. The dominant religious text of the Imperium is something called the Orange Catholic Bible. The religious sisterhood of the Bene Gesserit manipulate religions for their own ends, ends whose fulfillment will take generations. The ancient struggle for power plays itself out against a backdrop of religion and ecology.

There are Ursula Le Guin's novels and stories with deep ecological and mythical roots running through them. Octavia Butler's explorations of race and gender and sexuality. Robert Silverberg's dark

psychedelic treatment of colonialism in *Downward to the Earth*. The list goes on and on. Religion, society, and culture are all examined through various critical lenses.

And along with all the gender-bending and body-swapping and social criticism, there are stories that span light years of space and millennia of time. We encounter alien races and cultures. Entire planets and systems are the training grounds for the imagination. There are few topics, few possible futures, that have not been explored in speculative fiction. Some of those futures are now our present.

We could dismiss these works as mere fiction, but are they any less relevant than the stories of Moses or Elijah or Mohammed or Jesus or Buddha? There is little doubt that they contain truths about human beings and our societies.

I think of these stories as representing a huge number of thought experiments. And I use the word experiments very deliberately. These stories have rules. They take place in natural universes. They may imagine things like faster than light travel or new power sources, or alien races, but there is no magic or other supernatural forces in them. Like all good experiments, they ask the question: What if?

I believe that these stories and others like them can be seen as sources of our living tradition, as part of the lineage of humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Because this is one of the gifts of our UU heritage, that we are not bound to a single set of sources, a single book, or a single lineage of thought. As the Roman playwright Terence once said – I am human, and nothing human is alien to me. And through speculative fiction, nothing alien is alien to us. Everything human, and indeed, NOT human, is a potential source of wisdom

Without the ability to imagine a future different from the present, we would be forever trapped in the past. Without the ability to bring critical thinking to bear on every human endeavor, we would be at the mercy of all kinds of social, religious, political, economic and emotional forces.

We stand on the side of love. We speak of creating Beloved Community. We sing that love will guide us. And that's all very well and good, but we need rockets too. And I use rockets as a kind of shorthand, a symbol, if you will, that stands not just for reason and critical thinking, but that vision and imagination which sees the different futures for the world.

Love alone is not enough. Love without rockets goes nowhere.

I want to ground that thought in our humanist roots, which are themselves rooted in something older, the Enlightenment. Yeah, I know, the Enlightenment has gotten a bad rap from any number of directions... but many of these accusations are not only unfounded by the historical evidence but they arise from the misunderstanding of several key values held by the majority of the Enlightenment thinkers: happiness, reverence, hope, and reason.

From here on.. I'll be quoting, drawing from, and referring to *Moral Clarity* by Susan Neiman.

So.. happiness, reverence, hope, and reason.

One of the critical achievements of the Enlightenment was to redefine the concept of evil. Prior to the Enlightenment, all evil, and the human suffering that resulted from it, was seen as ultimately resting in God's hands. If you suffered, it must have been because you had sinned or were innately immoral. Likewise, if you were healthy and prosperous, it was because you were good and virtuous.

The Enlightenment separated physical evil from moral evil and in doing so, simultaneously disentangled happiness from virtue. Once this separation occurred, we could say that sometimes “bad things happen to good people” and that everyone ultimately has a right to pursue happiness.

The existing social orders and their myriad inequalities and injustices foundered on this new concept that happiness was a human right and not some fleeting dispensation from God. This critique of traditional religion is one that brings a holy reverence for human condition into the world.

The Enlightenment clearly took aim at traditional religion, for a couple of reasons. Most Enlightenment thinkers were deeply reverent and reverence was an integral part of the Enlightenment perspective. At the time of the Enlightenment, church authority was deeply entwined with that of the political establishments, and supported by webs of superstition and deliberately fostered ignorance. To them, the social order was a brutal, hypocritical and immoral one that held human nature to be incapable of virtue, or to possess any ability to change or progress, and this order was aided and abetted by religion.

The hypocrisy of this relationship was part of the Enlightenment’s issue with religion. Neiman writes, “the Enlightenment was making an argument not about the truth or probability of religion, but something far more striking: Traditional religion is immoral.”

The second objection the Enlightenment had to traditional religion is perhaps more surprising than the first. In picturing God without glory, humankind without honor, traditional religion was itself irreverent. A God that could be bribed by good behavior was no different from gods who sent rain to nourish the crops in return for a sacrificed bull.

The Enlightenment thinkers felt that the idea of God as a vain and brutal tyrant whose favors could be petitioned through certain supplicating behavior turned humanity into either helpless children or

vicious criminals . Consequently, for Voltaire, the Christian image of God was ultimately blasphemous; Kant saw it as idolatrous.

The Enlightenment sought to reduce human fear and ignorance so that something greater could flourish. Religion seemed to both foster fear and to feed on it and, as a result, to do violence both to human nature and to God's nature, thus destroying the dignity of both. Without this dignity, there can be no reverence.

In response, they had what can only be called the revelation of Deism: a "natural religion" based on reason and nature, stripped of doctrine, with common denominators based on truths accessible to everyone. Deism expressed awe and wonder at the marvels being revealed by the new sciences and, in doing so, demonstrated proof of God's existence in a way that honored Him without demeaning humanity.

To quote Neiman, "The Enlightenment denied piety to make room for reverence. If piety is a matter of fear and trembling, reverence is a matter of awe and wonder" Indeed, Enlightenment thinkers held a great deal to be worthy of reverence and were "irreverent" only in attacking a false and devious piety.

It was called the Enlightenment for a reason, which is that it arose from darkness, and cast light in the darkness. This was not just the darkness of Europe in the preceding centuries, with its brutal religious wars, poverty, injustice, superstition, and ignorance, but also the darkness of the prevalent Christian view that humans are all naturally evil. Enlightenment thinkers, while keenly aware of the darker side of human nature, felt otherwise.

Rousseau, for example, thought that humans were not born in original sin. Voltaire felt the same way, stating that "Man is not born evil; he becomes evil". Both of these men were not looking to

defend the view that humans are naturally good, but rather, to disavow the Christian view of the time that humans are naturally evil.

This view of human nature opened up the possibility for hope to flourish; for if we are neither naturally good nor naturally evil, but hold the potential for either, this gives us hope because we are not trapped by our nature. We can make choices and it is possible to become better human beings, individually and collectively. It means that progress is possible, though not guaranteed. This was hope and it was a bright light in the both the real and metaphysical darkness of their world.

Reason is perhaps the value most central to the Enlightenment, yet it is also the most misunderstood in our modern world. It is important, then, to discern exactly what reason meant to these thinkers so that we can begin to reclaim its true meaning. Simply put, they desired that the world made sense, that the world was a reasonable place, and that the reasons for things made sense. There was a deep understanding that reason had limits, and that an “unreasonable rationalism” was both overweening and authoritarian.

The Enlightenment was never opposed to passion or sentiment. Voltaire called the passions “the principle source of the order we see today in the World.” Enlightenment thinkers rejected a dualism that pitted reason against emotion because they ultimately saw humans as complex beings who were moved by both. Similarly, as the growing field of science revealed more of the mystery of the natural world, Enlightenment thinkers saw reason, as they defined it, to be woven throughout nature.

The Enlightenment saw reason as being allied with passion and nature, yet standing firmly against the old authorities that had ruled all the domains of life with an iron hand. In a world dominated by authority based on revelation, superstition, fanaticism, and inherited privilege, reason was the key to freedom because it allowed normal people to discern truth for themselves.

Neiman says this about Immanuel Kant: Kant recognized that reason cannot be a fact about the world, but a demand on it: *For everything that happens, find the reason why it happened this way rather than that.* It is reason that allows us to go beyond whatever experience we are given, and allows us to think: *This could have been otherwise, why is it just like this?* The actual is given to us, but it takes reason to conceive the possible.

Without that capacity we couldn't begin to ask why something is the way it is, or imagine that it might be better. These abilities form both the basis of scientific research and social justice. They are so fundamental that we can hardly imagine functioning without them, and we take them for granted.

Reason is what allows us to imagine new possibilities – individually and collectively – to be able to conceive of a world other than the one we have always inhabited. So much of what we value and hold to be “just the way things are” in our modern lives has been birthed through this imperative.

Yes, our Universalist roots are steeped in love and universal salvation. But our Unitarian roots run deep in the Enlightenment, in reason, and the modernity and humanism that arose from it. We have long been – and still are - home to atheists and agnostics, dissenters and free-thinkers, scientists and visionaries, writers and artists – those who asked why?, those were not satisfied with the answers, those who imagined new worlds. Who reasoned their way there, with the reasons of both the mind and the heart.

Love, yes. But let us not forget that this love rides on rockets. To forget this is to forget our heritage, and forget the struggles of those who came before us. Let us continue to build upon that heritage. Let us continue to reason together... and build even better rockets for our love.