

I'm serious when I say that the Sneetches and Other Stories is one of my favorite books ever. Dr. Seuss was at the height of his production in the early 60s when I was starting to read, and everything from the Cat in the Hat to One Fish Two Fish were among my favorites. Not many people know about the earlier career of Theodore Seuss Geisel. He was a commercial cartoon artist for many years. If you've ever seen the cartoon ads for the bug spray, Flit, often with the tag line, "Quick, Henry, the Flit!", that's Dr. Seuss. He did Flit ads for 17 years, starting in 1927.

In 1941 he started contributing cartoons to a left-wing publication called PM, trying to warn the United States about the dangers of fascism and Nazism (World War II was just over a year old) and push the U.S. to break out of its isolationism and support Britain and the Soviet Union. When the U.S. entered the war in December of 1941, his cartoons continued to warn Americans of complacency, urge participation by everyone in the war effort, and poke fun at those who didn't want to sacrifice. (Show cartoons.) I have a collection of his World War II cartoons here, and if anyone wants to look through them later, they're welcome.

Many of Dr. Seuss's wartime cartoons were controversial, since they held the establishment up to scrutiny and satire. But no one ever came to the office of PM and shot Dr. Seuss, or any of the publishers. But on January 7 of this year, as we know, murderers did enter the offices of Charlie Hebdo, the Paris satirical magazine, and killed eleven employees. Charlie Hebdo's cartoons were critical of Muslim extremists and portrayed the prophet Mohammed as a sponsor of terrorism. The offense of these journalists and cartoonists was not only in picturing Mohammed in a critical light, but in picturing him at all. In Islam, to show a picture of Allah, or any saint, or Jesus, or Mohammed is idolatry and strictly forbidden. There are no statues or icons in any mosque; it's just not done. So to picture Mohammed, especially in a satirical way, is a direct affront to Islam. The price for free speech is, sometimes, death.

This has led to the phrase "Je Suis Charlie," adopted by supporters of the Charlie Hebdo magazine in particular, and free speech in general. Je Suis Charlie is French for "I am Charlie" By saying "I am Charlie," journalists and supporters proclaim that, if extremists are going to attack anyone for exercising their free speech, they will have to attack us all.

But several voices have been careful to say "I am not Charlie." I read an editorial by David Brooks at the New York Times, who titled his op-ed piece just that: I Am Not Charlie Hebdo. He pointed out that, first of all, there are not many of us who have done anything that would earn being attacked for our beliefs or actions. This is me talking not David Brooks: Most of us have a hard time doing anything out of our comfort zone, whether it's attending a march, engaging in a boycott, even writing a letter to the editor. Our church is struggling with the question of just how engaged we truly want to be with the world; how much of a difference we really want to make. Rev. Pam has challenged us to step up and participate, and I, for one, hope we can do it. Don't worry, terrorists are not likely to gun us down for challenging the authorities on police actions, or economic inequality.

But equally, I don't think most of us would want to be Charlie Hebdo. I've seen all their cartoons--they're on the Web--and they are childish and offensive. As David Brooks says, if [Charlie Hebdo] had tried to publish their satirical newspaper on any American university campus over the last two decades it wouldn't have lasted 30 seconds. Student and faculty groups would have accused them of hate speech. The administration would have cut financing and shut them down.

Charlie Hebdo is critical not just of Muslims; they go after government, politicians, Jews, the Pope, the Catholic Church as a whole. Their cartoons use all the stereotypes that we find

offensive. In fact, most American media outlets have chosen not to publish any of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons. Some people in Europe, and America, have criticized this reluctance as cowardice; or they make the same point Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote the famous Democracy in America in the 1830s, made: that, while America has provided the most complete freedom of speech and expression in its laws, the people are actually less free in their expression than people in Europe. We are all self-censoring, or we all censor each other without government doing it for us.

I would say that these American media are not afraid of violence, but simply not willing to offend. It's true that most of us do self-police our expression. I don't swear in front of my mother, for example. She's heard all the words, and I doubt that she would be shocked by anything that anyone could say; and she can't wash my mouth out with soap--she's 90; I could outrun her. But why offend her for no reason?

And when we talk about race and religion, we're careful with the words we choose. Sometimes too careful; we're very uncomfortable talking about things we don't truly understand, so we sometimes don't make the arguments, or don't even ask the questions, that would result in enlightenment, because we don't want to say anything wrongheaded.

But there's one topic we--some of us--don't mind saying hurtful things about, and that's mainline Christianity. I have a lot of Facebook friends--not anybody in this church--who are ardent atheists, and their posts about organized religion include things like "delusion"; "mythological"; "stupid." Leading atheist spokesmen like Bill Maher and E.O. Wilson consistently talk about how "What's dragging us down is religious faith...for the sake of human progress, the best thing we could possibly do would be to diminish, to the point of eliminating, religious faiths...that anyone who believes in God must have an electrical fire going on in their head; that God is a psychotic mass murderer." These are quotes.

So where does this hostility come from, and why am I uncomfortable about it? I am happy to identify myself as an agnostic. I like the bumper sticker: "Militant Agnostic: I don't know, you don't either." But I have to admit, when I'm talking with people who are believers, and I take the questioning side, the agnostic side of the discussion, I sometimes have to say "but I'm not talking about Bill Maher's atheism, or E.O. Wilson's atheism." Right; I am not Charlie, but I'm not Bill, and I'm not E.O. either.

This church, this congregation, is known to be a humanist congregation. I think it's true that most of us--or a good number of us--are agnostic or atheist. And many or most of us grew up in a Christian environment. So we know Christianity from the inside. And many of us turned our backs on, and rejected, Christianity. So we may have some resistance to Christian messaging. And modern Christianity has certainly done plenty to make itself a target. It consistently tries to entangle itself with the government; there's the whole war on Christmas thing--Christmas, which they stole from the pagans. There's evolution. And the very group that says they want more freedom, to practice their own religion, wants to insert themselves in our bedrooms and our health clinics.

It's right to hold up the dominant and often oppressive force to inspection and ridicule--like Dr. Seuss did. When people talk about Congressmen and say "they're so white"; or when someone dances or tries to clap along with music and people say "that's so white," that's funny. You can safely say things about a powerful majority that you can't or shouldn't say about a struggling minority. And I've noticed that on TV shows--and once I first noticed this, it became

hugely apparent--that whenever there's a show about a family, the dad is always an idiot. From Ralph Kramden, to Archie Bunker, to Homer Simpson, all idiots. Edith Bunker might have been silly, but Archie was crazy. Now, Leave it to Beaver: Hugh Beaumont was a pretty smart dad. Quiet, stable, always had good advice. But since that era, the only dad I can think of--and I've checked a lot of shows--who has any sense is Bill Cosby. Cliff Huxtable was a pretty smart, sensible guy--but still, Clare was definitely the brains of the family. And every other show? Dad's an idiot. And I have to say, sometimes I think, "Hey, I'm a dad; come on. What's all this beating up on men?"

And what profession is the butt of the most jokes, by far? Lawyers. As a middle-aged, upper-middle-class white lawyer guy, I agree that it's good for all these groups to be cut down to size. If I feel bad about how men are lampooned on TV, I just start counting presidents.

But none of these groups--white people, men, lawyers, the rich--are the subject of what I see is the same undercurrent of hostility that mainline religion is. And I think we have an instinctive reaction against religious involvement in our own lives.

Here's a story: A neighbor has a 16-year old son who wants to get a tattoo. The dad says, look, do anything you want to your hair, wear any clothes, get piercings; hair grows back and a piercing can close up. But a tattoo is permanent (or nearly so). How can you know that what you're interested in now is still going to be something you want on your arm in ten years? And have you really thought through how an employer is going to react? And besides, it's illegal for a minor to get a tattoo. So the kid comes to me; and I said, your dad's right.

Now here's a question: What if it was a 16-year old girl who wanted an abortion? And her father would kill her if he knew she was pregnant?

There's a recent story about a 17-year old girl who has cancer, and the only possible treatment is chemotherapy. And she is refusing to have chemo because she knows what it's going to be like and there is absolutely no guaranty that it will do any good. And her parents back her up on this. And the authorities are wondering how far they can go to push her into getting the chemo. Now what if it was a 17-year old girl with meningitis, and the treatment is antibiotics, and she refuses because she has faith that God will cure her and doesn't want to conflict with the divine plan? And her parents backed her up on it?

Here's another subject to ponder. Last week was Imbolc, a pagan holiday; it's one of the "cross quarter days" that comes around every three months. Samhain is at the beginning of November--it formed the basis of All Saints' Day, and Beltane marks the onset of summer at the beginning of May (I understand that there's a church in the western suburbs that puts on a really good Beltane pageant). Last Sunday, the beginning of February, was Imbolc. The pagan deity associated with Imbolc is Brigit, who became St. Bridget in the Christian calendar. A craft that one can make is a Brigit's cross. You take a ribbon or a piece of plant material, fold it over this way, then another one bent over this way, then this way, and this way, and you keep going around, and the whole thing builds out into a square with things coming out of it. Suppose your kid came home from school with a Brigit's cross. Oh, look, it's a Brigit's cross; how nice. Now what if it was a rosary?

These are interesting questions. Why do we react so strongly when we feel like the Christian religion is insinuating itself into our lives? Would we react so strongly if it were Buddhism, or Hinduism?

I don't have any answers. This is a UU church. So all I can say is let's think about it.

I like to end a service with What Is To Be Done? What do we do now? Here are my action items. First, don't be afraid of doing things that seem dangerous, just because they're uncomfortable. If your church, or your association, or your party asks you to go out and do things--to speak out, to go to a rally, to study an issue, to write a letter--don't hesitate to do it. Nobody's going to shoot you. You don't have to stand in front of a tank to make a difference. Next: Stand up against censorship; support the right to say anything, no matter how critical, no matter how low, no matter how vile; because if the worst speech is not protected, the best and most important speech is also unsafe. Then: Build, support, buttress the wall between church and state. Don't tolerate the intrusion of religion--any religion--into government, or the intrusion of government into religion. But as you relate to other people's religion, or maybe your former religion, consider how and why it worries you. And if you meet anyone who's different--whether they're a person of faith with the Holy Spirit inside them, or a pair of pants with nobody inside them, don't be afraid of them just say Hi! Amen, and blessed be.