Devout Atheist: Abstract of Talk Given at Gordon Conwell Seminary on 10/21/15
By: Vanessa Zoltan

I spend a lot of my time contemplating the idea of God. I spent 3 years in Divinity School, have served as a prison chaplain and as a hospital chaplain and I now serve as a University chaplain. Not believing in God does not come naturally to me. I’m an American. God is on my money and in my pledge of allegiance. Not believing in God is a choice I have to make over and over again. It is a commitment that I have made.

All four of my grandparents are holocaust survivors and for them, God died in Auschwitz right next to their parents. Being an atheist is important to me. I have skin in the game on that word. But today, I am going to tell you about something that I take seriously… something that I treat as sacred: Jane Eyre. As an atheist, it is still important to me to revel in what is sacred in this world.

For two years I have experimented with the certainty that if I wrestled with Jane Eyre, it would teach us things I could never anticipate. I picked some passages from Jane to read closely and I read them and re-read them, and discussed them, then re-read them again. And I contemplated these passages.

I have learned endless amounts from practicing experimental certainty; or what some would call faith. Now that I’ve tried it, I just try it on every once in awhile and it always inspires me. It makes me more hopeful and more patient.

But in a world of the Syrian Refugee crisis, in a world of friends getting kidnapped and raped just this past week, in a world where God is still burnt up in the crematorium, I am proud of my stance outside of the church doors. I am proud to listen and to vote with my body and say, ‘not yet. You haven’t earned me yet.” Until people inside the church can account for those whom I feel are still unaccounted for, I sit on the church steps and say thank you to those of you who are inside. I will listen to what you have to say; but stay outside.

Brief Bio: Vanessa Zoltan is the Assistant Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University and the Humanist Hub where she co-facilitates a class on treating, "Harry Potter" as a Sacred Text. She has her BA in English Literature from Washington University in St. Louis, her MS in Nonprofit Management from the University of Pennsylvania and her MDiv from Harvard Divinity School. She is working on a book about treating, "Jane Eyre" as if it was a Sacred Text.