

Atheists in Church! – What Will They Think of Next?
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
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Tenth grade was an exciting time for me. My first year in high school. I got my start as a high school athlete, running on the cross country team, and then on the track team. In the spring of that year I turned sixteen and claimed my driver's license. With two friends from my English class, Don and Jim, I explored the Detroit Public Library and a neighboring book store, Marwell's. And in the back of a magazine we found at Marwell's book store was an ad for a little book: it was called *An Atheist's Manifesto*. All three of us ordered copies, and I read it eagerly. [Joseph Lewis, *An Atheist Manifesto* (NY: Freethought Press, 1954) 64 pp]

I don't know what ever happened to that book, but I probably could write something like it myself if I were so inclined. The world of reason and intellect was opening up to me, and I was no longer able to accept on faith the traditional ideas of Christianity.

My topic this morning is *atheists in church*. I hope you're out there. But before going further, I have to ask, What is atheism anyway?

The word atheism, or atheist, quite simply, has two parts. First is that little letter *a* at the front. That *a*, Kerry tells me, is the *alpha privative*. It is a deceptively brief prefix that *deprives* what follows; it negates what comes after it. It's like a minus sign. And what comes after the *a* here is *theism* or *theist*, from the Greek *theos* or God.

Thus a *theist* believes in God, an *a-theist* denies the existence of God.

What it comes down to, then, really, is how you define *God*. If someone were to ask me, "do you believe in God?" or if they were to ask, "are you an atheist?" My response to them would be the same: "you'll have to describe God for me, tell me about God – about your God."

Thus Socrates, you may recall, was accused of atheism. But if you read Plato's accounts of Socrates, he certainly doesn't sound like an atheist. He was a pious man who appears to have valued his relationship to God. But his theological views were not the traditional ones in the Athens of his day: hence the charge of atheism. Likewise, the early Christians were considered atheists by those who accepted and practiced the traditional religion of Rome. The Christians denied the existence of the Roman gods.

Here's how Alan Wolfe puts it, in a review essay on "The Strange Career of Atheism in America." "Non-belief owes almost everything to belief; without religion to give it meaning, atheism would be the least interesting of subjects." [*New Republic*, April 12 & 19, 2004, p. 28]

While we would tend to take the side of Socrates and the early followers of Jesus in their struggles with the authorities, Alan Wolfe reminds us that “refusing to believe in God does not by itself make you right-thinking.” [*New Republic*, p. 33]

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What I’d like to try to describe now is the theological perspective, the world view, of an atheist of our era, in a land where Christianity has shaped the terms of the debate. What follows is my impression, based on my experience. I welcome your additions and corrections.

First, an atheist assumes a consistent world. It’s no different on Sunday morning from the rest of the week. It’s no different, at least at the fundamental level, today from the way it was, say, 2000 years ago.

§ If we don’t have virgin births today, then we didn’t have virgin births 2000 years ago, either.

§ We don’t have resurrections today. If Jesus really died on the cross, then he stayed dead, just as dead people today – I mean those who are really, unequivocally dead – they stay dead.

Second, an atheist is committed to the use of reason and to the scientific method. There’s no room for miracles.

§ A few loaves of bread and a couple of fish did not feed a multitude.

§ And bread is bread – there’s no way to transform it into, well, into meat.

Third, an atheist, by and large, takes a materialist view of the world:

§ no ghosts or other ethereal creatures,

§ no extrasensory perception,

§ no realm accessible only in death.

On the other hand, the atheist presumably would not exclude such nonmaterial entities as love, law, or logarithms.

Fourth, an atheist sees no reason to have an open mind with respect to things that appear to be not only contrary to experience but also inherently implausible – life is too short for that. Likewise, accepting something *on faith* in such a situation strikes an atheist as intellectually dishonest, or just plain silly. We may not be able to *prove* that Jesus will not come again, the atheist would say, but there’s not a shred of evidence that would lead us to conclude that he will.

Fifth, and finally, an atheist is comfortable with Ockham's Razor. [See Ockham, *Philosophical Writings* (ed. Boehner, Nelson, 1957), pp. xx-xxi] That's the idea that if some alleged entity or explanation doesn't actually explain anything, if it doesn't make a difference, then we can get along without it. You can *say*, for example, that God created the world, but what does that get you? It just leads to the question, where did God come from? Attributing creation to God is no better than saying, it's a mystery beyond our understanding.

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Let's return to my early years. I had always taken religion seriously. I remember when I was eight or so, thinking that I would become a minister, a Presbyterian minister. If what Christianity teaches is true, I thought at the time, then I should share it with others; I should spread the good news. I remember in eighth grade, going through confirmation class. I wasn't completely convinced that it all made sense. Easter, the resurrection of Christ, seemed implausible. But I was willing to set aside my doubts. If Mr. Gibson, the youth minister, an intelligent and well educated young man, if Mr. Gibson was willing to accept it, then I'll give resurrection the benefit of the doubt.

But reason soon gained the upper hand, and I began to look critically and skeptically at the doctrines I had grown up with. As a senior in high school, I wrote a term paper on the idea of the immortality of the soul. My conclusion was that immortality was wishful thinking.

These interests in theological questions and critical thinking led me, as an undergraduate, to major in philosophy. Skipping over a few decades, when I arrived at Wesley Theological Seminary in the fall of 1997, I was eager to get back to the study of theology, to help these Methodists understand their intellectual errors.

But it wasn't until my sixth and final year, in Systematic Theology, that I found a course in which we could have basic philosophical and theological discussions of the nature and existence of God. Or I *thought* that we would finally get down to basics in that course. But it doesn't work that way. In the Christian world of the seminary, the existence of God is a given.

If you look in the Bible, what you do *not* find there are arguments for the existence of God, or theological discussion of what it means to say that God created the world. You would no more seek to prove the existence of God than you would your mother. Jesus had a personal, intimate relationship with God; Jesus addressed him as "Daddy." It would not have occurred to Jesus to try to *prove* that God exists.

But the intellectual world changed, and in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, and others, too, they applied their philosophical skills to proofs of God's existence and to detailed accounts of God's nature. The philosophers didn't intend it, but that philosophical inquiry started us down the road that, for some, has led to the denial of God, as Alister McGrath explains in the reading I

shared earlier. [Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 31-32]

The proofs for God's existence were either logically flawed or emotionally unsatisfying, often both. Attempts to describe God's nature led to dead ends or insoluble puzzles.

For example, the God that the philosophers idealized – based on what they found in the Bible and based on their theorizing as to what would count as God – that God is both omnipotent and perfectly good. But look at our world. There's suffering and evil. Why didn't God do a better job? This is the age-old problem of how, when you look at the mess we're in, of how God can be considered both all-powerful and all-good. That's the subject of the Book of Job, which Kerry talked about a few weeks ago. The short answer, in my opinion, is that you've got to give up one or the other: you have to discard God's absolute power or discard God's absolute goodness. But if you give up either power or goodness, are you still left with God?

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At this point in our discussion, we could go in three directions.

- (1) We could, first of all, examine in greater depth the philosophical arguments concerning the existence of God.
- (2) Or, secondly, we could take a less philosophically rigorous look at the concept of God, to see if we could put some life back into it, to see if we can still find some meaning in it for our lives.
- (3) Or, third, we can explore how we might get along without God. Specifically, can you be religious without God? Or, as I put it in my sermon title, what are atheists doing in church?

All three directions have their attraction, but let's take the third road – we'll save the other two for another day. Today, I want to consider the apparent oxymoron, the self-contradictory idea, of the religious atheist.

But, of course, in describing the issue this way, I'm giving away too much. Consider Confucianism or Buddhism. No one could deny that Confucianism is a religion; no one could deny that Buddhists are religious people. Yet God has no necessary role in Confucianism. And the enlightenment that the Buddha found was in *this* world.

Some people are religious – they go to church on Sunday – because they believe that this will win them favor from God, or that it will enable them to avoid eternal punishment. But I'd be surprised if many Unitarian Universalists felt this motivation. For us, whatever our view of God, being part of a religious community is not an attempt to appease a God who holds our fate in his hands.

Thus, when I ask why an atheist would seek to become part of a religious community, why an atheist would come to church, I am really asking the broader question, why is *anyone* with a liberal theological viewpoint religious? In other words, why are *we* here?

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We all have our stories, we all have our different reasons, but let me try to generalize. Here are a few of the reasons that lead people to join a liberal congregation such as this one.

1. First is the quest for **reliable community**. Let's return to *my* story. During my young adult years, I remained interested in religious and theological topics, but I didn't belong to a church or any kind of religious community. That changed in 1980 when Kerry and her two children and I formed a family together. Kerry and her children had been part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in suburban Philadelphia, and she wanted to join one in our new home, in northern Virginia.

I was open to the idea of our going to church together as a family. As it turned out, being part of the Unitarian Church of Arlington helped glue our new family together. I was pleased that Amanda and David could receive a helpful religious education there. For myself, I found community, a substitute for the community I left behind in the old neighborhood in Washington. The absence of the doctrines that I had rejected 20 years earlier made my participation easier. I also found music: a wonderful choir that welcomed me; organ music filled the sanctuary. There was a dance group, too. I gradually found, as well, an opportunity to develop my organizational skills and the satisfaction of knowing that I could make a difference.

If that were all there were to a religious community – the realization of reliable community – it would be sufficient, though perhaps only minimally sufficient. But I think there's more.

2. Second comes the provision of **mutual recognition and support**. We care for one another in our religious communities. There are more-or-less formal rites of passage. We greet the newborns with naming or dedication ceremonies. In weddings, we recognize the joining of two people, two consenting adults, in partnerships of love and commitment. In memorial services, we celebrate the lives of those who have crossed the final river.

Today, we have officially welcomed our newest members, recognizing their commitment to this congregation and the congregation's commitment to them.

But equally important is the informal support and recognition. We are there for each other in time of need – when illness strikes; when the years catch up to us or to our loved ones, and the days ahead seem vividly finite; or when the inevitable wounds in relationships become infected. We're here for each other. And, don't forget, we need people to congratulate us, to

celebrate with us, when our efforts, our endurance, or our luck make the world or some small part of it, a better place.

If that were all there were to a religious community – the realization of reliable community and the provision of mutual recognition and support – it would be sufficient. But I think there's more.

3. Third, in a religious community we can live out **a world of peace and justice**. Religious communities – either individually, in *ad hoc* groups, or in organized denominations – religious communities can be a force in the world. We hope they are a force for good, but that's not guaranteed.

When I was a young anti-war activist in Washington DC, we had our meetings in a church basement, St. Stephen's, and a member of the Friends' Meeting [Abe Bloom] and a future rabbi [Art Waskow] were our leaders. A few years earlier, it was the black churches in the South that provided the backbone and infrastructure for the civil rights movement. Equally important are the almost anonymous members of congregations who staff the soup kitchens, take meals to the homeless, transport the elderly to doctors' appointments.

If that were all there were to a religious community – the realization of reliable community, the provision of mutual recognition and support, and the living out of a world of peace and justice – it would not only be sufficient, it would be a blessing to the world. But I think there's more.

4. Fourth, we need **a place to say "thank you."** The trees this fall were amazing. It turns out that Arkansas is as beautiful as Pennsylvania. I didn't expect the little maple tree we planted in our back yard to put on such a show in its first season, but it was full of color. The beauty of nature is not something that I created or that I earned or that I deserve.

Some of you have met my granddaughter, Nisba. She's well over two now, but here are a few excerpts from her mother's email reports back when Nisba was only eight months old. What she learned in those first eight months is nothing short of amazing.

Nisba's hand-clapping is getting much better. She routinely actually flattens her palms against one another now. Sometimes she even claps her hands to indicate her own happiness.

I left the room to wash my hands. By the time I came back, she had pulled off her shoe. I went to get the camera. By the time I got back, she had also pulled off her sock.

Nisba loves to wave at people now. She knows it is charming and gets a charmed response. She often waves when I carry her out of the room where the three of us have been together.

Last night Nisba was playing while I read nearby. She was reading *Pat the Bunny*, when suddenly out of the corner of my eye I saw her waving. Sure enough, she was looking at the last page of the book, which says “Paul and Judy are waving bye-bye. Can you wave bye-bye?” How great is that? She reproduced the feat this morning at the hospital group. She’s not only interacting, but she’s interpreting pictures!

It’s the miracle of life. [pianist play *Ubi Caritas* three times, very softly] We can see the leaves. We can watch the infant grow, and we remember, or at least we understand, that *we* were there once ourselves. We can appreciate and participate in the beauty of music – and in the beauty of the Grand Canyon, and of mathematics. In short, we are alive, and we choose life.

We didn’t do this ourselves; we didn’t create all this. We didn’t bring about our own lives. It is given to us; we can’t claim to deserve it. It’s grace; it’s a gift.

In response, we have an urge to express our gratitude; we want to say “thank you.” And we *can* say “thank you.” There doesn’t have to be Someone Out There whom we’re thanking. There doesn’t have to have been purposeful action creating the miracles that surround us. We can still say “thank you.”

If that were all there were to a religious community – the realization of reliable community, the provision of mutual recognition and support, the living out of a world of peace and justice, and a place to say “thank you” for this amazing grace – it would be sufficient, unbelievably and insatiably sufficient. But I think there’s more.

5. Fifth, we acknowledge our **solidarity in our finitude**. There are questions we cannot answer, that we will never be able to answer. We know that our lives are only the briefest of flashes in the long eternity in which we are embedded. Indeed, there was one eternity before our birth, and there will be another after our death. Our minds are incapable of fully grasping this.

But even at the normal scale of things, the idea that life some day will go on without us, that we will depart this earth without knowing how it will come out – whether it’s our granddaughter’s career or the situation in Iraq – that idea stays at least a step beyond our understanding.

And then, finally, you get to the ultimate question, why, and through what mechanism, does the world – the whole thing, the universe, the cosmos – why does it exist? That’s not a question for the scientists to answer, no matter how close they come to the instant of the Big Bang.

You won’t find the answer in churches, synagogues, or mosques, either, but we can stand together in our ignorance, in our humility, and in our finitude.

If that were all there were to a religious community – the realization of reliable community, the provision of mutual recognition and support, the living out of a world of peace

and justice, a place to say “thank you” for this amazing grace, and solidarity in our finitude – it would be sufficient. Yes, there’s more; there’s always more. But at some point, when you travel down the highway of words, the road becomes harder and harder to find, and eventually runs out.

So let’s turn from words to music and sing our final hymn, “Give Me That Old Time Religion” [*as revised*]