

God Bless the Atheists

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

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The great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick defined an atheist as “a person without any invisible means of support.” Today I want to celebrate these brave souls in our congregations and in the society at large who define themselves without reference to any divinity. I want to go beyond saying that atheists are welcome in our congregation and our movement; I want to say you are cherished here, because you bring a perspective that this religious body needs if it is to walk its talk.

And as I speak, we are in the middle of a crisis of faith as I said last Sunday. Some would say that there are no atheists in foxholes, that when things get really tough, people instinctively turn to religious belief. My gut says that the opposite is the case. As we lose faith in secular institutions like the stock market, the government and our banks, we tend to reexamine our beliefs in everything. It may be that atheism is on the rise in our current climate.

We need to clarify our terms at the outset. I am going to use atheist this morning to mean a person who positively denies the existence of a god or gods of any kind, natural or supernatural. Agnostic is a term I use for those who say they don't know about the existence of God. And the term humanist I am going to use as a category that can cut across these first two and also include some who do believe in God, for to me humanism is simply saying whether or not there is a God or gods, we put humans first.

Now we don't consider these questions in the abstract, because we have a church here, and it is fundamental to this church that it embraces theological diversity. If there is a bedrock value of Unitarian Universalism, it is theological pluralism.

We can be more specific and concrete. Two years ago, you took a survey in this church, as part of the process by which you were searching for a minister. In that survey, you were asked about your theological beliefs. Several theological positions were expressed, and you were asked to say which ones you agreed with. Now a crucial factor in interpreting a survey like this is how many choices the respondents were allowed to choose. The rules suggested by the UUA allow each respondent to pick two positions – we are, after all, committed to pluralism even when we're taking surveys! But I suspect in the survey here there was no restriction on the number, because the percentages I will state below add up to 242%!

Now, I don't necessarily agree with the wording of these choices, but I want to read the labels, the explanation and the percentage of you who adopted it as at least one of your theological positions. I am going to go in descending order of popularity.

73% of respondents endorsed *Humanism* - "I believe that human beings are responsible for 'goodness' and 'meaning' and must rely on each other for support." Now that's a strong majority; no other position garnered more than 50%.

Going down from there we had three positions that each claimed about a quarter of you. 27% endorsed *Natural theism* - "The powers traditionally attributed to a supernatural deity are inherent in the natural world, which elicits my respect and devotion." Almost the same number, 26%, endorsed *Open agnosticism* - "I am undecided about god's existence." And 25 % endorsed *Nontheism* - "I don't relate to the concept of 'god.'"

Then there was another cluster of two positions in the mid-teens: *UU Christian*, at 18% "I consider myself a part of the Christian tradition in that I best understand God and the human condition through the stories of the life, teachings and death of Jesus of Nazareth;" and *Mysticism* at 16%; "I find support and value in the fulness and the connectedness of all things, with or without God."

Slightly below this pair was another pair, both at 13%: *Earth-centered spirituality* - "I celebrate the sacred circle of life, which instructs us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." and *Pantheism* - "I equate god with the forces and laws of nature."

Then slightly below that pair was *Theism*, at 11% "I find support and challenge in a god with whom I feel a personal relationship." And just below that, at 8%, was *Deism* - "I believe that there is a god, but with whom we cannot have a personal relationship."

And just below that, at 7% was *Atheism* - "I deny the existence of god of any kind."

So atheism on this survey, at least, is statistically quite small in this congregation, though not as small as three other positions: *Feminist spirituality* at 3% - "I join with others to reclaim the divine feminine by honoring the sacredness of our mother the earth." *Neo Paganism* at 1% - "I am inspired by the interconnectedness of all life, natural and divine, and find inspiration by participating in the traditions of indigenous peoples. And finally, *Panentheism*, which, though not defined at all in the survey, still got the vote of 1 %. Maybe that was a protest vote.

And I sympathize with the protest, because even taking such a survey offends some basic sense of decency. For many of us, these are the most important and may be the touchiest questions of our lives, and it seems a sacrilege to have to put them in boxes.

So the first caveat about the survey is that it probably felt pretty intrusive to some of you. And the second caveat is that the results are probably strongly influenced by the wording of the choices.

I was in search last year and I read probably 30 of these surveys for one UU church or another. Humanism always won, and it always won by a handy margin, usually scoring between 60 and 75%.

And if you look at the wording, that result is no wonder: "I believe that human beings are responsible for 'goodness' and 'meaning' and must rely on each other for support." Who could reasonably disagree with that? It's motherhood and apple pie! By this definition the whole world is humanist.

There was an attempt to articulate humanism in 1934, the humanist manifesto, and it has been updated twice since then. Compared to those documents, the language here is very watered down. I can't escape the suspicion that whoever drafted this survey wording was deliberately trying to cast a wide net.

But be that as it may, the survey makes quite a sharp distinction between humanism and atheism, the most notable feature of which is that humanism is expressed broadly and positively, while atheism is expressed narrowly and negatively: "I deny the existence of a god of any kind."

I suspect that this negative quality accounts for atheism's poor showing here – a mere 7% – and in other churches whose surveys I've seen. I doubt that atheism is really the eleventh most popular theological position here. I have a gut feeling that the percentage of us who deny the existence of a god of any kind is much closer to 30 or 40% than 7%, but the choice doesn't look very appealing on a survey.

But this only underscores a major public relations problem for atheism and atheists – it is a negative concept in its very definition. It's formed from the Greek word *theos*, meaning god, with the prefix *a-*, meaning not. The Wikipedia entry on atheism notes that when the Greek word *atheos* occurs in the New Testament¹, it is translated "without God."

According to that same article, for most of its life the variations on the term *a theos* were used by the pious to denote someone of lesser piety. Socrates was put to death on the accusation, among other things, that he was an atheist, though he denied that accusation and spoke approvingly of gods in some of the dialogues. Like the term *unitarian* in America, the term *atheist* was originally a derisive term applied by one's opponents. According to religion scholar Karen Armstrong, "During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word 'atheist' was still reserved exclusively for polemic ... The term 'atheist' was an insult. Nobody would have dreamed of calling himself an atheist."²

Of course, that has all changed, and just as our religious ancestors took the term *unitarian* hurled at them by their opponents and accepted it, so some who reject a belief in god have gradually adopted the term *atheist*.

They did not, however, completely erase the negative connotation, for that connotation does not just exist in the minds and rhetoric of the atheists' opponents – that is, the myriad theists and believers of all stripes who love to use atheists as rhetorical whipping-posts – but is inescapably present in the very definition.

This is why the philosopher Daniel Dennett and others have tried to promote a different term; they want to call themselves *Brights*. But that's a subject for a different sermon.

¹In Ephesians 2:12

²A History of God 1999 London Vintage, quoted in the Wikipedia article mentioned.

We can spend the whole morning here discussing terminology, but I need to turn now to the point of this sermon: explaining the benefits of having atheists around. Why do I say, God bless the atheist! Am I just fooling around?

No, I'm dead serious. Atheists are a vital part of the present cultural scene and of the religious scene within Unitarian Universalism. Some of them within our walls may have felt a little beleaguered four years ago when UUA President Bill Sinkford called for a return to a "language of reverence". But only last March, the UUA's big ad campaign in Time magazine was headlined with the question "Is God keeping you from going to church?" This is an atheist-friendly question, my friends, and the fact that the UUA would put huge amounts of money to put that question publicly should leave no doubt that this is an atheist-friendly denomination.

What is the benefit to all of us from having a welcome mat out for atheists? It ensures that we are basing our covenant on something other than a shared theology.

Because there is no theological difference which can be wider than between those who say there is a god and those who say there isn't. These are the poles of opposition. And it isn't always comfortable for us to be in the same church. The atheists will let the minister know if he or she has mentioned God or Jesus too many times, or used too many Bible stories. The UU Christian will let the minister know if he or she hasn't mentioned Jesus enough lately. The UU from a Jewish background will ask the minister what observance he or she will make of the High Holy Days.

We all have our sensibilities and sensitivities and it is negotiating these theological straits that makes skipping this vessel so interesting. I just try to keep us off the rocks, folks.

But let me return to the atheists. I want to lift up three ways in which atheists make a positive contribution that deserves to be sung about. First, they have carried the burden of maintaining the wall of separation between church and state in America which benefits all religions. Second, they have lately started a debate in public about the value of all religion which forces us all to think broadly about these things. And third, they have engendered in all of us a certain humility which is where we should have been all along.

First, atheists are the first sentries at the wall of separation between church and state. Most of us will know the name of Madeline Murray O'Hair, who litigated many religious freedom cases, but how many of us know Ellery Schempp? Ellery was a high school student in a Philadelphia suburb in the 1950's and a youth member of his local Unitarian church. He objected to the requirement that he read 10 Bible verses and the Lord's Prayer every day in his public school. He and his parents brought suit, and the case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where it was combined with a case brought by O'Hair. Both Ellery and O'Hair won a joint decision in 1963 outlawing the practice of daily prayer and Bible readings in public schools. I don't know, but I suspect, that it was this decision that started the "impeach Earl Warren" movement in those days.

Now Ellery Schempp has been active in humanist circles all his life, but I don't know that he

actively has ever declared himself an atheist. But in my previous life as a civil liberties lawyer, I have had the honor to represent someone who is an avowed atheist. The Calvin and Hobbes cartoon on your order of service cover makes it particularly appropriate for me to mention Herb Silverman, for he is a math professor at the College of Charleston and a very public atheist. He came to me in the late 1980's incensed that there was a provision in the South Carolina Constitution that barred from certain public offices anyone who doubted the existence of a supreme being. I was horrified, too, and I took the case. We ran him for governor in order to test the law, but we lost that first case on a technicality. We then ran him for the exalted office of notary public, for that was another office covered by the provision. After seven years, we finally won a ruling out of the state supreme court striking down the provision. Herb framed his Notary Public Commission and hangs it on the wall with his academic honors.

Like other public atheists, Herb has to put up with a lot of abuse from the crazy fringes of the public. Not everyone has the guts to make this public witness, so we all need to be grateful to the ones who do.

The second thing we should be grateful for is the public questioning of religion in general. The atheistic anarchist Emma Goldman put it well back in 1898: "I do not believe in God, because I believe in man. Whatever his mistakes, man has for thousands of years past been working to undo the botched job your God has made."³

She also said,

"The philosophy of Atheism represents a concept of life without any metaphysical Beyond or Divine Regulator. It is the concept of an actual, real world with its liberating, expanding and beautifying possibilities, as against an unreal world, which, with its spirits, oracles, and mean contentment has kept humanity in helpless degradation."⁴

Two years ago, several best-selling books written from an atheist point of view came out. These included the scientists Daniel Dennett⁵ and Richard Dawkins⁶ and the non-scientists Sam Harris⁷ and

³speaking from a Detroit pulpit in 1898, quoted from Annie Laurie Gaylor, *Women Without Superstition*, p. 382

⁴Emma Goldman, "The Philosophy of Atheism," in Goldman's *Mother Earth* journal, February, 1916

⁵Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Penguin Group 2006)

⁶Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Bantam Books, 2006

⁷Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York: WW. Norton & Co. 2005) pp. 20-21.

Christopher Hitchens⁸.

Now it is easy for UUs to see how an atheistic writer can have problems with conservative Christianity, Judaism and Islam, for most UUs have problems with those religions. But these so-called “new atheists” don’t stop with conservative religions: many of them critique moderate or liberal religion as well.

Daniel Dennett, in the reading I did a few minutes ago, basically questions why anyone would go to a church that does not explicitly embrace the idea of a supernatural God. He concedes that liberal religions exist, but assumes they will never have much popular appeal. Now we who are in the pews and pulpits of liberal churches may quarrel with that proposition, but we also need to concede that it makes a certain amount of sense. If you are setting out to deal with the whole religious scene, wouldn’t you concentrate on the more conservative elements because they are more numerous and politically important? Is Dennett telling us something to which we need to pay attention? And this leads me to my third blessing from the atheists, humility. Humility is a great thing and it can be shared across the religious spectrum. A believer in a traditional Abrahamic God needs quite a bit of humility, for the message of books like Job is that we humans are nothing compared to the wisdom and power of God. A naturalist, pantheist, mystic and neo-pagan can have humility in the face of the scale, scope and complexity of the physical universe. A humanist is enjoined to an attitude of humility in the face of the enormous and intractable problems of bringing about peace and justice in the human community. The agnostic is enjoined to humility in the face the limits of knowledge about ultimate things.

So when the atheist says in public, “is not!,” the rest of us have a visceral reaction that says “is too,” just like a child on the schoolyard. But if we listen, read the books, consider the arguments, we may find that we learn something about what we do believe.

Policing separation of church and state, making us think deeply about the value of what we are doing, and leading us to a humility we need. These are only three reasons why I say God bless the atheists.

I started by quoting Harry Emerson Fosdick’s definition that an atheist is a person without any invisible mens of support. And I say to the atheists in our pews and to those in society at large, you have a visible means of support: it’s called Unitarian Universalism, and you are always welcome in our churches.
Amen.

Reading: Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* 2006 New York: Viking

⁸Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007) Twelve/Hachette Book Group USA/Warner Books

Penguin, pp197-98.

“Stark and Finke [*Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (2000 Berkeley: University of California Press)] express their fundamental attitude well when they disparage Don Cupitt’s *After God: The Future of Religion* (1997), which endorses a brand of religion from which all traces of the supernatural have been removed:

But why would a religion without God have a future? Cupitt’s prescription strikes us as rather like expecting people to continue to buy soccer tickets and gather in the stands to watch players who, for lack of a ball, just stand around. If there are no supernatural beings, then there are no miracles, there is no salvation, prayer is pointless, the Commandments are but ancient wisdom, and death is the end. In which case the rational person would have nothing to do with church. Or, more accurately, a rational person would have nothing to do with a church *like that*.

...[Stark and Finke recognize that] ‘there are “godless” religions, but their followers are limited to small elites – as in the case of the elite forms of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.’ The attractions of Unitarianism, Episcopalianism and Reform Judaism are not restricted to the Abrahamic Traditions, and if the ‘elites’ find that they just cannot bring themselves to ‘believe that have experienced long and satisfying exchange relations with’ God, why do they persist with something they call religion at all?’