

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“The Atheist Revival”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 2, 2007

Spoken Meditation

The Atheist’s Prayer

Our brains, which art in our heads,
 treasured be thy name.
Thy reasoning come.
Thy best-you-can-do be done
on earth as-it- is.
Give us this day new
 insight to help us resolve conflicts and ease pain.
And lead us not into supernatural explanations;
deliver us from denial of logic.
For thine is the kingdom of reason,
and even though thy powers are limited,
and you're not always glorious
you are the best evolutionary adaptation
 we have for helping this earth now and
 forever and ever. So be it.

Sermon

How things have changed!

To recognize how much things have changed in a very short period of time, return to the national mood of November, 2004. President Bush had just been reelected reportedly through the influence of evangelical “values” voters. The Bible-Belted “red states” were poised to set the nation’s agenda. It seemed then as if a candidate had to be “born again,” to get elected again.

In March of 2005, Anglican scholar (and former atheist) Alister McGrath published a book titled “The Twilight of Atheism.” In it he wrote, “Atheism is in trouble. Its future seems increasingly to lie in the private beliefs of individuals rather than in the great public domain it once regarded as its natural habitat.”

But the wind was already changing. Also in 2004, Sam Harris published his first book, “The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason.” W.W. Norton had taken a big chance on the book, described in the magazine *The Nation* as: “a gutsy, hyperbolic and idiosyncratic [book] on religion by [an unknown] graduate student in neuroscience.”

The book sold well. Fellow atheists Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Michel Onfray and Victor Stenger jumped on the band wagon. Their books have also jumped onto the best sellers' lists.

So, why a surge by atheists right now, we might ask? One explanation could be "faith fatigue" among skeptics and the hard-core Left, who ordinarily make up 15 percent of the American people. Another explanation is subtler. American evangelicals have not been immune to triumphal attitudes, arrogance, foolish public statements, and, sometimes, downright hypocrisy in personal behavior. A backlash against evangelicals has been brewing for years.

This is hardly the first time atheism has gained public interest. Paul Johnson, eminent British historian and author writes:

Waves of atheism have swept the West before. One was in the mid-18th century, when the devastating Lisbon earthquake, killing some 60,000 people, shook the belief of many in the benevolence of God. Another was in the mid-19th century, when advances in geology destroyed the traditional chronology of the Old Testament, proving that Earth was much older than the 6,000-odd years the Bible allowed. A third spasm followed the First World War, when the combination of Freud's writings and Einstein's theories of relativity upset established views of the human psyche and the universe.

Thus we find ourselves in perhaps a fourth upsurge of atheism today (at least among those who like to buy books). I'm sure this has given pleasure and satisfaction to some of the atheists in our congregation, as they see their lack of faith defended in the public square by these articulate writers and debaters.

With gusto, the New Atheists reject the existence of God as portrayed in tradition, practice and scripture. Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene* and more recently *The God Delusion* is the leader of the pack. Professor of evolutionary biology, Dawkins holds the chair for the public understanding of science at Oxford, endowed by a Microsoft billionaire. He wanted Dawkins as the first holder, because he likes to imagine Dawkins as "Darwin's rottweiler."

Dawkins isn't moderate in his description of the Old Testament God as "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it ... petty ... unjust, [an] unforgiving control-freak ... misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, [and] genocidal. ..."

Christopher Hitchens, with his book, "God is Not Great," comes in a close second to Dawkins in hyperbole and quotability. Hitchens says, "Monotheistic religion is a plagiarism of a plagiarism of a hearsay of a hearsay, of an illusion of an illusion, extending all the way back to a fabrication of a few non-events."

Much of the atheistic critique of religion is very familiar to a Unitarian Universalist audience. Many of us share parts of that critique, as we are a non-creedal congregation that does not impose doctrine or dogma on its members. There is

much in the Jewish and Christian scriptures and traditions we hold at arm's length or even reject completely.

What is new with these new atheists is their insistent critique of liberal religion's tolerant, "live and let live" approach to fundamentalist religious traditions. The New Atheists ask: how can moderate religionists co-exist with scriptural literalists who don't appreciate the way in which their holy texts were constructed, and translated, and retranslated, and edited together, from different texts and different sources? As anyone who has had their work edited knows, the editor can easily shape and change the meaning of the text by what they keep in, modify and take out, leaving their fingerprints all over it. Book reviewer Doug Brown says "In many respects, the Bible was the world's first Wikipedia article."

In the wake of September 11, 2001, Harris argues there are toxic ideas and messages in scripture that we can ill afford to be tolerant of with the proliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction. Harris writes:

Religious violence is still with us because our religions are intrinsically hostile to one another. Where they appear otherwise, it is because secular knowledge and secular interests are restraining the most lethal improprieties of faith. It is time we acknowledged that no real foundation exists within the canons of Christianity, Islam, Judaism or any of our other faiths for religious tolerance and religious diversity.

To speak plainly and truthfully about the state of the world--to say, for instance, that the Bible and the Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish--is antithetical to tolerance as moderates currently conceive it. But we can no longer afford the luxury of such political correctness...

One of their big concerns is how religion solves the problem of death by projecting eternal life somewhere else than the surface of this planet. The effect of that projection is to diminish the importance of this world here and now. And that can have devastating effects on the ecosystem, individuals and human societies.

Dawkins puts it this way:

"I am trying to call attention to the elephant in the room that everybody is too polite-or too devout-to notice: ... specifically the devaluing effect that religion has on human life. I don't mean devaluing the life of others (though it can do that too) but devaluing one's own life. Religion teaches the dangerous nonsense that death is not the end..."

To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised if they are used."

Harris, Hitchens and Dawkins go further and challenge any peaceful coexistence between religion and science at all. The late Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould characterized his approach as respect for their "nonoverlapping magisteria." Dawkins insists that the religious magisterium is always overstepping its bounds,

making claims of scientific fact about the origins of the Earth, for example, that fly in the face of all scientific evidence.

“Religion,” writes Hitchens, “does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It must seek to interfere with the lives of nonbelievers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths. It may speak about the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one. This is only to be expected. It is, after all, wholly man-made.”

Many people become atheists through critical examination of scripture and questioning religious authorities. In my research for this sermon, I found a groundbreaking study of American nonbelievers published last year. The authors extensively surveyed atheist clubs in San Francisco, Idaho, Alabama and Manitoba. One of the common findings was atheists’ commitment to truth and intellectual integrity.

A number of the study sample had been raised in fundamentalist homes. When they began to question what they had been taught and lose their faith, what they reported again and again was they just couldn’t make themselves believe what they didn’t think was true. Ironically, the fundamentalist approach requires a kind of certainty that can’t tolerate any doubt. Children raised with this commitment to certainty who began to doubt couldn’t let go until they found the truth. If they tried to pretend they believed, they failed. Some said they wished they could make themselves believe because of the stigma attached to being atheists. (The non-heterosexuals here, I expect, know all about this!)

As I was reading this study, particularly stories of the social cost of being an atheist, I realized just how important our congregation is as an accepting, safe haven for atheists and their secular search for truth. It helped me appreciate the intense reactivity a few years ago when the Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford was *misquoted* about wanting to put God language into Unitarian Universalism. What he actually said was about UU’s needing to develop a greater “language of reverence,” a language that works for both theists and atheists.

What I hear Sinkford addressing is a defensiveness against religion from the atheists in our movement. What I hear Sinkford calling for is a new approach to religion. And to my amazement, this is exactly what Harris and Dennett are looking for too. This new approach must not be based on scripture but on what we know and can experience in this world. Here is how Harris puts it:

We cannot live by reason alone. This is why no quantity of reason, applied as antiseptic, can compete with the balm of faith, once the terrors of this world begin to intrude upon our lives. Your child has died, or your wife has acquired some horrible illness that no doctor can cure, or your own body has suddenly begun striding toward the grave--and reason, no matter how broad its compass, will begin to smell distinctly of formaldehyde. This has led many of us to conclude, wrongly, that human beings have needs that only faith in certain fantastic ideas can fulfill. It is nowhere written, however that

human beings must be irrational, or live in a perpetual state of siege, to enjoy an abiding sense of the sacred. On the contrary, I hope to show that spirituality can be--indeed, must be--deeply rational, even as it elucidates the limits of reason. Seeing this, we can begin to divest ourselves of many of the reasons we currently have to kill one another...It is time we realized that we need not be unreasonable to suffuse our lives with love, compassion, ecstasy, and awe; nor must we renounce all forms of spirituality or mysticism to be on good terms with reason. (43)

Daniel Dennett sees the same need that Harris does. Using scientific methods, however, to study how religion succeeds or fails at serving our emotional and spiritual needs, he thinks, is the best approach. Helping people figure out how to transcend selfishness and move into meaningful relationships with what is greater than themselves, Dennett recognizes, as one of the very important functions religion fulfills for us. He writes:

What [religious] people have realized is one of the best secrets of life: let your self go. If you can approach the world's complexities, both its glories and its horrors, with an attitude of humble curiosity, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only just scratched the surface, you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your own mundane preoccupations will shrink to proper size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things. Keeping that awestruck vision of the world ready at hand while dealing with the demands of daily living is no easy exercise, but it is definitely worth the effort, for if you can stay centered, and engaged, you will find the hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person. That, I propose, is the secret to spirituality, and it has nothing at all to do with believing in an immortal soul, or in anything supernatural.

I'm very excited by both Harris and Dennett's approach because they are not bound by ideology but rather are responsive to what they discover in this world, through direct experience. We cannot know with absolute certainty the truth claims of scripture. We cannot trust completely the reports of revelation from God by rabbi, priest, imam, sage or guru. Even if Jesus were to appear before me and walk with me and talk with me, I'd have to question the validity of that experience too. The mentally ill do this all the time and to no great positive effect in their lives.

The collective wisdom, literature, music and poetry of the world combined with personal experiences and spiritual practices that are shared and validated by others can also be a fine foundation for our approach to religion here. We make no absolute truth claims for this way but it can effectively satisfy the religious impulse for many people.

I close with the words of Sam Harris that I think capture the spirit of what Unitarian Universalism is trying to do:

Man is manifestly not the measure of all things. This universe is shot through with mystery. The very fact of its being, and of our own, is a mystery absolute, and the only miracle worthy of the name. The consciousness that animates us is itself central to this mystery and the ground for any experience we might wish to call "spiritual." No myths need be embraced for us to commune with the profundity of our circumstance. No personal God need be worshipped for us to live in awe at the beauty and immensity of creation. No tribal fictions need be rehearsed for us to realize, one fine day, that we do, in fact, love our neighbors, that our happiness is inextricable from their own, and that our interdependence demands that people everywhere be given the opportunity to flourish.

Benediction

Theists and atheists coexist in our congregation through mutual respect and appreciation. We both agree in the use of our minds and reason as we approach religion. The matter of the existence or non-existence of God we leave to each person's conscience. God or no God, we are all devoted to creating a good life for people in this world today.

I close with Thomas Jefferson's words to a friend in a personal letter of 1787:

"Shake off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear."

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