

"Atheism I" - first of a series

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In April I offered a sermon criticizing the New Atheism as framed by polemicists like Christopher Hitchens. These folks adopt an atheism often as fanatical as the dedicated believers they oppose. Their 'faith' in their atheism is absolute and unassailable. Anyone who thinks differently is challenged, demonized or dismissed. I have little time for fanatics of any stripe, the new atheists included.

Following that service a delegation of atheists from this congregation politely pointed out that atheism is far richer more thoughtful and more diverse than the kind I had described. I agreed and we quickly devised a plan to devote these three weeks to atheism. I want to thank Gilbert Bouchard, Suzette Chan, Ray Warnatsch and Ben Wiesz of the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostic club for their assistance in planning this series. Among other things they loaned me enough books to qualify me for a post-graduate course in Atheism. Today I will rely heavily on *Philosophers Without Gods* an anthology of essays. Some describe personal journeys towards an atheist outlook, others are a reflection on issues relating to atheism. It was a very enlightening work.

In this first sermon I will take a look at the diversity of atheism and consider a few of the key areas of concern. Next week I will explore Humanism. The vast majority of people, believers and nonbelievers alike fall somewhere in between the poles of faith and reason stretched along a complex continuum. Humanism, a popular stance in the Unitarian church, is the place where people who have wrestled with faith and who still allow for the possibility of God in their lives, and those who have wrestled with faith and decided against having God in their lives, well, Humanism is the place where they most often mix and mingle. Humanism therefore deserves some deeper consideration in this series. The final week will be given to conversations. Gilbert Bouchard and Suzette Chan will join me here for a formally informal chat about personal views and the future of belief. Then we will open the whole question up to you for a discussion of your personal beliefs. We'll end the service on time that week, but I have booked the room for a continuing discussion circle after formal adjournment.

The dictionary defines atheism as "disbelief in the existence of a God or gods." What could be more simple? And yet atheism is not simple. For starters, most who become atheists do so because the claims of religion do not make rational sense to them. But once on that road, they are constrained, at least to a degree, to believe only what they can prove. And as Ariane Sherine noted in the less than certain Atheist bus ads in London,

God can neither be proved nor disproved. To believe there is no God is contradictorily an act of faith!

Nor does one simply one day become an atheist. In most cases the decision to disbelieve only comes after a considerable amount of individual evolution, reflection on personal experience, and a good deal of hard thought. Several essay writers described a sense of loss and grief for the faith they had left behind. They surrendered some of the comforts religion can provide, and often went against family tradition. For many the final break with religion can be wrenching. Editor Louise Antony had a different emotional response, however:

At last I was ready to admit to myself that I no longer believed in God. I'll never forget the sudden upsurge of relief when I finally acknowledged that my faith was gone. I felt suddenly free – free of the obligation to avow propositions I did not understand, free of the struggle to make sense of doctrines that couldn't be made sensible, and free of the need to square everything I learned with Catholic dogma.¹

Few of us are born atheists. As proof I offer the way young children jump at embracing the magical and the fantastic. We arrive on this earth programmed to accept the impossible. Children embrace enchantment, and that is beautiful and even inspiring. However, some religious belief seems aimed at this audience of enchanted five year olds. Too many core messages fail to allow for human growth beyond that stage of development. That's one of traditional religion's problems. Most are based on magic and miracle that then have to be reconciled with our rational faculties, and the expanding realm of knowledge. That need to force reconciliation between faith and reason has, at times, produced some pretty amazing contortions. It has also produced the command to just 'believe and not ask questions' more often than it should have.

Perhaps because that childhood fascination with enchantment leaves such an indelible imprint, the majority are willing to tolerate its pervasive place in our society without significant criticism. We are born into a culture shaped by belief. Religious language and imagery pervades our society. There is a bias towards belief.

American philosopher Louis B. Amory comments:

The rate of theism has little to do with the level of scientific or technological development of the society in question. Consider the United States, where despite the country's constitutional commitment to 'separation of church and state' most institutions are infused with

theism.

Amory cites the motto 'In God we trust', notes that congressional sessions begin with a chaplain-led prayer, and that no politician would think to end a speech without saying "God bless America". Amory concludes, "Within this climate, sceptics and atheists are viewed with suspicion. We are presumed to be arrogant, devoid of moral sentiments, and insensitive to a wide variety of human goods." ⁱⁱ

As evidence note how the atheist bus campaigns capture headlines wherever they start up while religious advertising is barely noticed.

By and large, atheism is a choice made by adults, and, given our culture, it is a courageous choice. When announced publicly it invites dismissal or condemnation. In the UK one driver refuses to take out any bus with the atheist ad on its side. In fact the way I just framed it furthers the prejudice. Atheism is not primarily about not believing in God. It is rather an affirmation of a set of personal principles about the world that are based on rational ideas that don't require a god. It is not that atheists replace the divine with the human, as some believers claim and defame, but rather that atheists find no place for God.

Daniel Garber was a Jew:

God just became irrelevant to me and my life. I don't pretend to have an argument against the existence of God; that seems no more possible to me than an argument for his existence. ⁱⁱⁱ

In another essay, Anthony Simon Laden admits to feeling a passion for the Aristotelian description of a virtuous life, a distinctly humanist framing. A student observed that when giving his lecture on the subject he appeared to enter a state of rapture not unlike that of an ecstatic believer. Laden agreed.

(Atheism) is neither a conscious rejection of belief in God, nor a rejection of the possibility or desirability of a form of transcendence or rapture that takes me outside of myself or beyond myself. It is merely the absence of God on my imaginative landscape as a possible source of things... God plays no role in my...understanding. ^{iv}

For most atheists, their stance arises from a passion for rational thought and an extreme discomfort with the irrationality religion often demands. Required belief in divine beings, miracles and acceptance of stories that could not possibly be true are obstacles most atheists cannot overcome. Many are often troubled with the idea of an all powerful and all

knowing God who is supposed to be a moral figure. They observe the capriciousness of tragedy and reject that the suffering of the innocent could ever be a part of a moral God's plan. Stewart Shapiro writes:

President Carter once reminded us that life is not fair. We all know that. So why should we believe that this universe was created by a being driven by principles of fairness? And if this universe was created by a sentient being of some sort or other, why does this being deserve our worship, let alone our praise? Free thinkers have been asking these questions for centuries, and I have yet to hear the hint of an acceptable answer.^v

Shapiro then goes on to outline three broad stances one can hold on the interaction between religion and science or philosophy

"The first is that they are at war. The idea here is that religious faith is inherently irrational... Neither can accomplish its goal without vanquishing the other..." He cites Bertrand Russell as a chief proponent of the position. The New Atheists I mentioned at the outset fall into this camp. This is, unsurprisingly, the most polarized position. Folks in this group embrace their atheism with the passion of true believers. There is little interest in finding a common ground.

Next Shapiro names, "The rationalist tradition (that) has attracted some of the best minds in history. The underlying thesis is that religion, properly understood, and rationality, properly applied, pull in the same direction. The rational mind that comes standard with the human body is a gift that God has bestowed on us, and that we are supposed to use this gift to negotiate this world and to understand God's ways."

Here he cites Descartes and Maimonides as chief supporters. I would expand that list considerably. More and more liberal believers are embracing this humanistic approach. There is room here to celebrate what is human. There is little place here for a divinity that intervenes in daily life. Many modern day Christians like John Spong and Gretta Vosper are comfortable with this view. Similarly many atheist humanists are more amenable with this kind of approach, although they will push God even farther out of the equation. My point is that the respect for the value of knowledge and rationalism are pretty much the same among these middle ground atheists and the faithful alike.

Finally, Shapiro names a third position:

"...One further orientation on the relationship between religious faith and rational belief is that the two are incommensurable – they do not engage each other at all. Science and perhaps philosophy are at cross-purposes with religion." He then quotes David Hume: "Science concerns facts...what.

Religion concerns why.^{vi}

Perhaps there was a time when this was a viable point of view, but I am not sure it is anymore. The boundaries of scientific knowledge and technological ability have been pushed so far that we are indeed bumping up against the possibility of becoming gods of a sort. More and more members of the scientific community are asking moral and ethical questions as they go about their work.

They have to....Strides in genetics, biochemistry and medical technology have changed the very nature of life. Life can be prolonged, even produced and shaped on ways that were unthinkable outside of science fiction even two decades ago. We have the technology to destroy the world many times over deliberately and, through our exploitation of the environment, accidentally.

Religion once provided the basic moral grounding that limited – or tried to limit -scientific endeavour. But religion's failure to rationalize their beliefs have eroded that authority. Science and philosophy used to be able to either avoid the moral question or deal with them at arm's length. No more. The weakening of religion means that science and reason must now bear more and more responsibility for creating and naming their own moral and ethical touchstones. The challenge here is that philosophy and science have no center as religion.

There are many ethicists and philosophers working on these issues, but no clearly defined or enforceable set of grounding principles has been identified or agreed upon. The moral positions of atheism are little more sophisticated than, "Now stop worrying and enjoy your life," or, "Be good for goodness sake!" Perhaps that's sufficient, but personally, I lean towards wanting something more.

The challenge for atheists, perhaps an impossible challenge, is to move away from simple disbelief in God. They now must forge values and principles that can help fill the God-shaped hole left behind. That is a challenge perpetually facing Unitarian Universalism as well.

Stewart Shapiro has a a good starting place:

There is indeed mystery in life, a lot of unanswered questions of vital importance. I would not be a philosopher if I did not believe that, with all my being. Religion and philosophy alike grapple with the deepest questions of all: What is it all about? How should we live? Philosophy is often chided for failing to provide compelling answers to its questions. Perhaps one of the most important lessons of philosophy is to teach us how to live with the questions unanswered, rather than settle for unsatisfactory but popular answers... In exchange for the security, comfort and certainty of the world's

religions we offer only doubt and uncertainty, a cold, hard, logical look at the universe. But I'll take it.^{vii}

I agree that atheism might not have to answer the big questions of where do we come from and why are we here, but there is a need to keep up the philosopher's search for a compelling set of moral and ethical ground points by which we can live.

i Antony, Louise M. Quoted in "Philosophers Without Gods" edited by Antony, Louise M. (Oxford, 2007). P. 51

ii Amory, Louis B. Op. Cit. p. ix

iii Garber, Daniel Op.Cit. P. 35

iv Laden, Anthony Simon Op. Cit. p. 123

v Shapiro, Stewart Op.Cit. p. 4

vi Ibid. p. 7-14

vii Ibid. p.16