

Atheists and Agnostics

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According to an article in the secular humanist magazine *Free Inquiry* from the fall of 2002, the largest identifiable body of agnostics in the United States is within the Unitarian Universalist Church. I wouldn't be surprised if we are in the running for the largest identifiable body of atheists also. A 1987 survey found that only 3 percent of UUs believed in the standard supernatural notion of God. "Two-thirds acknowledged a 'life force' or 'spirit of love' -- but 28 percent called the word *God* an irrelevant concept."¹

So it is clear that, though I'm sure things have changed a bit since 1987, we have very few traditional theists among us in UU congregations (3 percent), and quite a few who would call themselves atheist or agnostic when it comes to the question of God. What I want to talk about this morning is, what does it mean to wear either of these two religious labels? What does it mean to those who call themselves such, for us as a community, and to our religious endeavor to be such a mix of believers?

Understood most simply, atheism is the belief that no God exists. The atheist denies the existence of a supernatural, affirming the natural, the repeatable, tangible stuff of life. The agnostic, on the other hand, chooses to live in a position of doubt with respect to the existence of God. He or she either cannot or will not decide whether a God exists, often because he believes there is no way to *know with certainty* about the nature and existence of God. The atheist says definitively God doesn't exist. The agnostic lives in a state of suspended judgment with regard to this question.

According to Natalie Angier (in her article in the New York Times Magazine of Jan. 14, 2001), only 3 percent of Americans admit to having no belief in God, while between 92 and 97 percent regularly say they do believe. (That seems to leave the agnostics somewhere between zero and 5 percent of the population, by my estimation.) One clear exception to this is among the scientific community: Even today, for example, the members of the elite National Academy of Sciences, when surveyed, show a mere 7 percent claimed to believe in a personal God.²

It is not surprising, really, that those who rely on reason and empirical observation have been willing to question established religious truths just as they have questioned established scientific truth based on those observations and reasonings. As the minority on the American religious landscape, however, atheists and agnostics have often been and continue to be marginalized, particularly in our civic culture. So, for instance, we say a pledge of allegiance that has the phrase "under God" in it, something that has been a subject of great debate recently. And our money has God's name stamped on it, lest we

forget to whom we owe it all. And sometimes we even swear on a Bible in court, though we do have a right to waive that particular means of assuring our honesty.

So it is not surprising that the atheists and agnostics are the ones who are most often the fiercest defenders of the separation of church and state. For when that boundary is eroded, it is their rights and religious freedoms that are most often ignored or challenged.

This year, in fact, the American Atheists Association, an atheist civil rights group, urged President Bush to end the tradition of a National Day of Prayer, a day that was celebrated on May 1 this year. (It just occurs to me that that day probably was chosen to contrast its symbolism with May Day, the national day to honor the worker in Communist nations.) Ellen Johnson, who is president of the American Atheists Association, writes that the movement for a national day of prayer "is a divisive fundamentalist movement that assumes that prayer, religiosity and being a good patriotic American are somehow connected. It marginalizes anyone who does not wish to pray."

Indeed, September 11th seemed to bring a wave of religiosity back on the public scene, and with less tolerance for scrutiny of that piety. Perhaps being attacked by people of another faith, supposedly commanded to do so by their faith, we needed to convince ourselves that God was on our side. So we talked it up a bit.

The question I have is, what are we afraid of? What has humanity for so many generations been afraid of that the atheists and agnostics stir up in us generation after generation?

Wendy Kaminer wrote in *The New Republic* in 1996, "Atheists generate about as much sympathy as pedophiles. But, while pedophilia may at least be characterized as a disease, atheism is a choice, a willful rejection of beliefs to which vast majorities of people cling."

It is not that atheists are out trying to convert the masses to their disbelief, or agnostics are knocking on doors to try to persuade people to doubt. In fact, both groups show a marked absence of evangelism. It is also not that they are terribly aggressive in their disputes with organized religion, though they do take their swipes. At the annual American Atheists convention, which took place in Salt Lake City this last year, the bookstore, for example, carried bumper stickers that made fun of the traditional "WWJD -- What Would Jesus Do?" bumper stickers. The atheists' said, "WWJD -- Who Wants Jelly Donuts?"³ So the group is pretty harmless and has a good sense of humor.

What I think stirs up fear and disgust and disrespect is probably a complicated mix of things. It is probably in part protectiveness of that belief that is central to your sense of meaning and order in this life, as God is for many of our belief systems. It is probably also in part that general desire for conformity that is still at the heart of American life despite our encomia to individualism. Finally, I would argue, it is in part a misunderstanding of what atheists and agnostics give up and what they don't give up when they give up a certainty about God. It's this I'd like to speak to briefly.

One misperception is that atheists and agnostics give up a quest for the moral good when they give up certainty about God. Of course, this is a false dichotomy. One doesn't necessitate the other or bring it along for free. We all know examples either of cases of "good Christians" who have been involved in atrocities -- like the Afrikaners in South Africa, or our own support for that brutal, peculiar institution of slavery on our soil. Being Christian (or, for that matter, Jewish, Muslim or any other God-centered faith) has never ensured kindness, civility, fairness or courage in its followers.

On the other side, there are plenty of agnostics and atheists who have been paragons of moral virtue. Clarence Darrow, who defended a teacher's right to teach evolution in school, and a committed agnostic, also defended 100 murderers whose crimes would have brought the death penalty, freeing them all of that ultimate punishment. He did so out of a general respect for human life and a clear respect for the virtue of mercy. Moreover, among our own Unitarian Universalist ranks, I don't need to tell you all that it has been the humanists among us these last 50 years who have often led the most determined fights against injustice in our world, many a time holding the theists' and deists' and panentheists' feet to the fire about what a life of faith requires of us. So morality can exist without a belief in God, just as immorality can exist with it.

There is also a mistaken belief that atheists and agnostics become cold materialists, shut off from any experience of awe or mystery in the world, and that this too makes them dangerous, flat, cold. But agnostics and atheists don't give up a reverence for life with their belief in God, nor do they cease to feel animated by power and beauty of creation because they stand in doubt of its purported creator. Astronomer Rebecca Elson captures some of this reverent relationship to life in her poetry. In one of her poems, she captures beautifully her sense of the miraculous nature of life and creation. The poem, however, is titled, "Evolution." It reads:

*We are survivors of immeasurable events,
Flung upon some reach of land,
Small, wet miracles without instructions,
Only the imperative of change.*

To be an atheist or an agnostic is not to surrender wonder or gratitude and awe, but simply not to see such things as a reflection of something called God. Instead they are seen as innate in this world, or wrapped up in the forces of physics or the incredible beauty of a world that is the end result of millions of years of mistakes and adaptations. To see beauty and wonder in these places and these ways is not to rob the world of its magic, but simply to change the lens through which it is understood.

To be fair, the atheists and agnostics have their own issues to confront. They are not the devils of the religious landscape, but neither are they its angels. Their Achilles' heel, it appears, is a creeping dogmatism. As Andrew Stuttaford, who covered the annual atheists convention for *National Review*, said: "Fundamentalism, it was obvious that weekend, does not depend on a god."⁴ Atheism, in particular, has fallen prey to the tendency for

dogmatic certainty, a tendency that makes it look startlingly like the dogmatism it decries in some traditional religious folk. It makes me think of that quote: "Choose your enemies carefully, for you shall become like them." So, indeed, this group sometimes needs to be reminded to walk humbly with its absent or not-certainly- there God.

"Atheism has its purposes in a culture suffused with icky piety and unthinking invocations of God," wrote Dan Kennedy in an article in *The UU World* this past January/February. "In a world plagued by -isms that claim to have The Answer, atheism serves as a counterweight." It also, I would add, humbles the rest of us. These groups remind us that goodness is not a door prize that comes with theism, and that awe and wonder are not the narrow province of the believer in a God.

They also remind us of two other things.

First, they remind us of the intellectual integrity to which we are all called, in matters of religion and elsewhere. I am reminded of Galileo's words when feeling the pressure to conform to a belief he could not see evidence for: "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use." We could easily write these words above the door of this sanctuary or on its walls, so central is that sentiment to our own religious practices and heritage.

Second, the agnostic in particular reminds us about not clinging to false certainty for the mere sake of certainty, and reminds us of the power of embracing our doubts. As Clarence Darrow said in defense of his own doubts about God, "I do not pretend to know [of] what many ignorant men are sure. That is all [my] agnosticism means."

Personally, I am not willing to give up the notion of God. My experience and reason has led me to believe that there is something out there, powerful and wondrous and animating the world. However, I am also 100 percent in agreement with the agnostics that what that force is ultimately is unknowable. God for me is ultimately wrapped up in mystery and paradox, so even in my theism there is a great unknowing. As such, I would imagine there are those out there who would say my notion of God is no God at all. Perhaps they would count me among the atheists too. So good thing I'm here, in this community of faith!

Finally, let me say that for some folks who come to this community from other places, it worries them that we are not all connected by a belief in God. This doesn't worry me at all. The Greatest of Mysteries, I would say, is not God (who knows just who she is), but discerning what it means to lead the good life, to rejoice in this created world, and what is required of us if we are to bring the Hoped-for Order down to earth. It is the endeavor to solve *these* mysteries of life that binds us together, and more powerfully than any single shared notion of God might. Whether we serve love and justice and each other in the name of God or simply in the name of the Good ("the God with two o's," as Carol described it), our quest for love and justice and beloved community is the same.

Let us close with another poem by Rebecca Elson titled, "Let There Always Be Light," which is one description of the journey we are on, the description of an astronomer with a deep religious sense of the world.

*For this we go out dark nights, searching
For the dimmest stars,
For signs of unseen things:*

*To weigh us down.
To stop the universe
From rushing on and on
Into its own beyond
Till it exhausts itself and lies down cold,
Its last star going out.*

*Whatever they turn out to be,
Let there be swarms of them,
Enough for immortality,
Always a star where we can warm ourselves.*

*Let there even be enough to bring it back
From its own edges,
To bring us all so close that we ignite
The bright spark of resurrection.⁵*

Go in peace. Amen.

Footnotes

¹ James A. Haught, p.48.

² Natalie Angier, NYT Magazine, p.37.

³ From Dan Kennedy's piece "Are You with the Atheists?" in the January/February 2003 issue of *The UU World*.

⁴ Dan Kennedy, "Are You with the Atheists?," *The UU World*.

⁵ From her book, *A Responsibility to Awe* (Carcenet Press Limited, 2001).