

The Spirituality of Atheism©

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(Sermon Inspired by [The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality](#) by Andre Comte-Sponville and Nancy Houston)

Imagine being an atheist in this country. I've been thinking about this a lot lately as both Christian and Muslim fundamentalists dominate our news cycle. The easiest definition of an atheist is one who uses language about ultimate meaning that does not contain the word God. For some of us in this room, that would not be too hard to imagine or to do. Some people here and in our faith tradition, do not use theistic (belief in the existence of a deity or deities) language to make spiritual meaning in their lives. But this country is replete with theistic language. It goes right back to our founding document, the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that all men (now people) are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. This founding document is very theological.

One of its purposes was to directly confront the notion that rulers were chosen by God or Great Spirit and that this is what gave them, and then their offspring and other relatives, the right to rule. You see it in coronations. It is the bishop or pope that places the crown on the head of the new monarch. At some point soon, there will be a new king coroneted in England and we will see this practice on display, hearkening back to being chosen and ordained by God to rule.

In this country the founding document, although it too is theological, declares that God gives the people rights, just by the fact of their humanity, and these people hold the power to elect leaders and then invest those people with the power to lead them. Still, it is pretty theological.

And what about the Pledge of Allegiance? In 1942 when it was adopted by Congress, it read, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” In 1954 it was changed to “one nation under God.” Atheists have challenged this in court, but “under God” still remains and school children across the country recite it every day.

Another thing that would bother me if I were an atheist, and in fact it bothers me even though I am not an atheist, is placing a hand on the Bible in court rooms and in taking the oath for public office. This was a practice that the Puritans brought over to this country when they came here. I understand that it is meant to convey the seriousness of the moment, perhaps even the sacredness. In a courtroom the desire for truth and justice is profound, and very often lives are at stake. So, I understand. But I started to think: upon *what* would I place my hand to signify my allegiance and commitment to the truth and to the holy? Would a couple of Beatles records do it? Or Bob Dylan, or even the sacred music of John Coltrane? What about our hymnal? Or a picture of the Dali Lama? Or a copy of the Tao Te Ching? Think about it. If the Bible wouldn't work for you, what would you place your hand upon to make a sacred vow?

Finally it came to me; I would place my hand upon a rock. I could easily pledge my fealty and my loyalty and commitment to Earth. But, I'm not sure our court system has evolved to that point yet.

When people think of religion, often they associate it with dogma, fundamentalism and even fanaticism. They do this often because it seems like the folks with the loudest voices in the conversation don't speak about spirituality and the ambiguities of faith; they speak or shout with absolute conviction. This is not just true in many of the major organized religions; it is also true of some atheist organizations. But it is not true for us as Unitarian Universalists. We can be religious and spiritual. We are

religious with practices and commitments, and at the same time we are open to the spirit and spiritual experiences found in nature, music, community, meditation, prayer and scripture. As we like to say: one light many windows. For those of us who are not interested in dogma but seek enlightenment, freedom and the life of the human spirit, we can be theists, but we don't need to be. We can also approach the life of the spirit from an atheist perspective. Can there be an atheist spirituality? Why not? Who owns the human life of the spirit? This is a question more and more people are asking.

I've also heard people say that just because we don't engage in petitionary prayer to a well-defined omnipotent God, that we are not really praying. The people that pray that way don't own the word *prayer* or the right to create an absolute definition of prayer. For us, prayer is a centering, a clearing, a deep listening to that still small voice within, and an opening to gratitude. It is an intentional openness to Spirit. This is available to everyone regardless of whether one is theist or atheist. This ties in neatly with the atheists' refusal to do or say or profess any belief in the hopes of a reward in the afterlife. Their altruism and fidelity to the moral and ethical imperative of being human are reason enough to work for justice, environmental stewardship and the common good. They don't do it out of fear of punishment from a vengeful jealous bossy god.

And it is important to remember that to be atheist does not preclude you from being religious. Some people are religious about their atheism, or their diet, or their money. Religions have defined sets of beliefs that bind people together and that bind all of one's thoughts and actions with the wider world. Atheists have some beliefs that hold together their worldview. They do not believe in a God of comfort when they suffer or grieve. They do not believe in a hell or any kind of afterlife. Like many Unitarian Universalists, atheists believe the most important questions do not concern what happens when we die, but rather what happens in how we live our lives right now. And more and

more atheists have begun to articulate an atheist spirituality, which I have found to be a wonderful complement to my own spirituality.

For many, the definition of faith is believing in something that you can't see or prove. An atheistic approach to faith would be to shift the word to its Latin root word *fides*. An atheistic approach would be to have fidelity to values, to a community and to a history with a sense of gratitude, commitment and attachment. Fidelity requires responsibility. Another part of fidelity is transmitting our values, what we hold to be good and true and beautiful, to our children -- not just our biological children, but to all children.

In addition to prayer and faith, atheists also have a different way of thinking about communion. To commune is to share without dividing. Think about having some cake. Let's say you got a whole cake and it was your favorite cake; for me it would be a carrot cake with lots of white frosting. If it was just you and the cake was not big, you could have as much of it as you wanted -- wouldn't that be fun? But then think about inviting 4 or 5 of your most favorite people in the world to share in this small cake with you. If you split it 6 ways, you would have a smaller piece, but there is an excellent chance that your enjoyment factor in sharing the cake together would go way up. That is the joy of communion, the pleasure in communion and the essence of communion, devoid of a theistic or Christian ownership or copyright of the experience. The cake is divided, but the communal experience -- the sharing and the joy and sense of connection -- is magnified. I feel that same way about our bread and apple communion. It was not a theistic communion at all. When we have our bread, or flower communion we are coming together to share our joy and to participate in blessing the world. No one religion owns the patent on any aspect of the spiritual life.

This would include the word *sacred*. All societies and all people hold certain things to be sacred. Sacred ultimately means something that you or your community would sacrifice your life for. Or your children's

lives. Holding something sacred does not need to imply theism. Humanity, freedom and justice are not inherently theistic or supernatural, but they are sacred to many of us, meaning that at our best and most moral we would be willing to sacrifice much to strengthen them. Holding something sacred also does not need to require it to be in any way supernatural. The supernatural component or magical thinking is something that many atheists find unpalatable when it occurs in religious or spiritual conversations.

Personally, I do not believe many of the supernatural claims made by religious traditions from the Roman Catholics, to the Voodoo practitioners, or Muslims. At the same time I accept the importance of what I call *trans rationalism*. Not everything that happens in my life makes sense, nor can it all be explained. I am comfortable with the knowledge that there are so many things I don't know and that there is ever unfolding mystery. Most atheists whom I know would concur that the world is full of mystery.

People that believe in the supernatural don't bother me, and in one way, I too find myself being just a wee bit superstitious. I know on one level how silly it is to wear special clothes when the Green Bay Packers play, and I still do it. Even so, I am also completely clear that I would not want to be governed by folks whose values came primarily from things that could be defined as supernatural. The commitment to reason, and not supernatural claims, is one of atheism's most cherished values when it comes to the separation of church and state.

Some people think that religion is crucial because they believe that religion is the basis for morals. And by that, many people think that the most compelling reason not to steal or kill or commit other acts of violence is because of divine retribution.

Whether you have religion or not, nothing can exempt you from having to respect the lives, freedom and dignity of other people. It is not

religion that makes love superior to hatred, generosity more healthy than egoism, and justice more worthy than injustice. Religion may help us understand these values, but does not have a monopoly on them.

I have an atheist joke for you.

Two rabbis are having dinner together. They are close friends; they can tell each other anything. All night long they discussed the existence of God and eventually come to the conclusion that God does not exist. At last they go off to bed. In the morning, one of the rabbis gets up, looks for his friend all over the house, doesn't find him, goes to look for him outside – and finds him in the garden, absorbed in his ritual morning prayers.

Surprised, he says, "Hey! What are you doing?"

"You can see for yourself – I'm saying my ritual morning prayers."

"That's just what surprises me! We talked halfway through the night. We decided that God did not exist, and here you are saying your ritual morning prayers?"

The other rabbi replies, quite simply, "What does God have to do with it?"

And I think that is a wonderful question for today. Just like in any other religious tradition, there are new thoughts or new ways of looking at atheism and today we look at how one can be an atheist and be a spiritual being. I love the atheistic concepts of fidelity and communion. I think the Jeffrey Harrison poem "Renewal" is an excellent example of this:

*At the Department of Motor Vehicles
to renew my driver's license, I had to wait*

*two hours on one of those wooden benches
like pews in the Church of Latter Day
Meaninglessness, where there is no
stained glass (no windows at all, in fact),
no incense other than stale cigarette smoke
emanating from the clothes of those around me,
and no sermon, just an automated female voice
calling numbers over a loudspeaker.
And one by one the members of our sorry
congregation shuffled meekly up to the pitted
altar to have our vision tested or to seek
redemption for whatever wrong turn we'd taken, or pay
indulgences, or else be turned away as unworthy of piloting our
own journey.*

This poem reminds us that we do not need a concept of God or theism to make life meaningful. Simple things like going to the DMV are not in and of themselves meaningful or sacred, but if we know where to look, if we know how to interpret, if we realize that we are the meaning-makers, a whole different picture emerges.

*Pausing to look around, I used my numbered
ticket as a bookmark, and it was as if the dim
fluorescent light had been transformed
to incandescence. The face of the Hispanic guy
in a ripped black sweatshirt glowed with health, and I could tell
that the sulking white girl accompanied by her mother was
brimming with secret excitement to be getting her first license,
already speeding down the highway, alone, with all the
windows open, singing.*

This non-theistic way of looking at the spirituality of things is available to all of us--theists or non-theists. The key lies in how we look at and interpret life.

Over the course of my life, my concepts of God and my understandings of God have shifted and changed considerably. Often I define God as a spiritual feeling of interconnectedness or as vibrations coming from the great tuning fork. So when Brian Wilson sings “Good Vibrations,” it feels holy or God-ish from both a sonic perspective and in defining God as akin to a good vibration or a tuning fork that I use to tune myself to.

The Dalai Lama, when asked what surprised him most about humanity, answered that human beings did. Because they sacrifice their health in order to make money. Then they sacrifice money to recuperate their health. And then they are so anxious about the future that they do not enjoy the present; the result being that they do not live in the present or the future; they live as if they are never going to die, and then die having never really lived.

Now one might wonder why I am using a quote from a world renowned religious leader in a sermon about atheist spirituality, and there are several reasons. First, like Unitarian Universalism, Buddhism does not require theism to work. When asked whether there was or was not a God, the Buddha never gave a definitive answer, in part because he thought that it was the wrong question to be asking. One of the living embodiments of Buddhism points us toward what one of the right questions might be. One does not need to be a theist to understand the truth about this message from the Dalai Lama. It is a spiritual concern that touches on how we live our lives in the present moment.

Not all atheists certainly, but spiritual atheists, don't want to be discounted from spiritual dialogues or to have their spirituality disrespected because they don't use theistic language. And whether we

are theist or non-theist, we can support their perspectives on the spiritual life and perhaps even find some nourishment in it as well. They take strength and nourishment from communion, fidelity, moral values and principles which they hold to be sacred or worth committing their lives to. How would an atheist define spirituality? He or she would define it as an inherent part of being human.

Don't we all have the power to seek and search?

Don't we all have the power to create?

Don't we all have the power to love?

Don't we all have the power to appreciate and participate? Don't we all have the power to connect with being, both our own and each other's? And don't we all have the power to dance with the mystery of this one precious life we are experiencing?

Blessed Be. Amen

References

Comte-Sponville, A. (Author) and Huston, N. (translator). (2008). *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*. New York, New York. Penguin.

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