

## ***Atheism: A Sense of Obligation***

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 03 June 2007 Chip Roush

### ***FIRST READING***

Bertrand Russell was a mathematician and philosopher. Born into British aristocracy, in 1872, his pacifism caused him to be jailed, during the First World War, and his atheism was attacked, with such vicious lies and slurs that he lost a professorship at the College of the City of New York. Instead, he taught at Harvard, before returning to England, where he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.

This is excerpted from his collection of essays, entitled "Why I Am Not A Christian"

"...I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue. The harm that is done by a religion is of two sorts, the one depending on the kind of belief which it is thought ought to be given to it, and the other upon the particular tenets believed. As regards the kind of belief: it is thought virtuous to have Faith—that is to say, to have a conviction which cannot be shaken by contrary evidence. Or, if contrary evidence might induce doubt, it is held that contrary evidence must be suppressed...

...[T]here are also, in most religions, specific ethical tenets which do definite harm. The Catholic condemnation of birth control, if it could prevail, would make the mitigation of poverty and the abolition of war impossible. The Hindu beliefs that the cow is a sacred animal and that it is wicked for widows to remarry cause quite needless suffering. The Communist belief in the dictatorship of a minority of True Believers has produced a whole crop of abominations."

**SECOND READING** Mary Zoll lives in a suburb of Boston. Born in 1947, in Newton Center, Massachusetts, she earned a PhD in biochemistry, before earning her living as a scientific writer and editor. She has attended UU churches since the late 1970's, and states that she has "no faith or belief in a higher power of any kind."

Her poem, "To Fill the Void" is one of those in the meditation manual we offered our new members.

I do not care if your true god controls the whole sweet universe or just your own small piece of it. Your god may fit black holes and worms in some grand scheme and rule alone or with a multitude of jealous gods or spirits of wild animals and trees. This god may want you sacrificed, or awed by sacred myths, or praying on your knees. That god may let you meditate or smoke cigars and twirl around. You may prefer a god or goddess, think it's all a joke—there is no god, just science, cold and pure. Just tell me you belong, your faith's enough to let you sleep at night, despite sure death.

### ***SERMON***

How many of you think that I am a theist? How many classify me as humanist? How many of you avoid such labels, because they too often get in the way of authentic human interaction?

One of the first poems I ever memorized, at least thirty years ago, I wasn't yet a teenager, was this gem, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century American, Stephen Crane: A man said to the universe: "Sir I exist!" "However," replied the universe, "The fact has not created in me A sense of obligation."

Even at that tender age, I felt a truth in those words, that the universe was not particularly fascinated by the unfolding of my individual life. On the other hand, my conscience consistently lures me toward goodness, and truth and beauty. And since I am part of the universe, I know that the universe contains a desire for goodness.

I can see some value in virtually all of our human faith traditions, including atheism, and I can also see where each and every one fails to complete. Each system reflects a portion of the truth. I have a colleague, who, when asked whether he is a theist or humanist, replies, "if you are a theist, then I am a humanist; if you call yourself a humanist, then I am a theist." This is his way of agreeing with both sides, and of challenging both sides, to see beyond their own self-definitions and prejudices.

For the record, I consider myself a religious humanist, and a mystic. \*And\* I know that these systems are only partial truths, as well. Virtually every religious tradition has something of value in it, and all of them lack something, as well. In this way, atheism is as good, and as imperfect, as any other theology.

Now, some of you may already object, to my characterization of atheism as a “theology.” Contemporary philosophers, and some atheist organizations, might agree. They prefer to define atheism as “an *absence of belief* in deities” rather than a belief in its own right.

“Theology” come from “theos” and “logos”— it is logos about theos, thinking and speaking about “theos.” If we define theos as “matters pertaining to god” then theology would indeed be “speaking about god” or perhaps “thinking and speaking about gods and goddesses.” So whenever somebody says, “I do not believe in god” she or he is doing theology.

Has anybody seen Sir Jonathan Miller’s “Brief History of Disbelief”? It was created for BBC television, and I do not know if it has been shown yet in the United States. When Miller was speaking about it with Bill Moyers, he said, “I’m reluctant to use the word ‘atheist’ to describe my own unshakeable disbelief and that’s not because I’m ashamed, afraid or even embarrassed, but simply because it seems so self evidently true to me that there is no God that giving that conviction a special title, somehow dignifies what it denies.” Miller thinks that even the term “atheist” comes from a theistic perspective.

Our earlier definition of “theology” suffers from the same problem. “theos” is really a word meaning “ultimate matters”— it is about birth and death and how to live, between the two. If one believes that we come from god, and return to god, and must live according to god’s laws while we are here, then restricting the word “theology” to mean “speech about god” is appropriate. If we believe that there might be other answers to the ultimate questions of life, then we should expand our definition of “theology” to mean “thinking and speaking about ultimate matters” and we will recognize that many atheists do speak and think about the ultimate questions, and therefore they are doing theology.

While we’re talking about language, we should also acknowledge that the term “atheist” is really no more precise than the word “god.” There are six billion people on this planet, so there are probably six billion different definitions of “god” Many of these may be similar enough that we can combine them, but there would still end up hundreds, if not thousands, of significantly different concepts about the who and what and how of the word “god.” Likewise, there are many different understandings of the word “atheist.”

Some people call themselves atheists because they do not believe in the Christian god. Some call themselves atheists because they do not believe in any deity. Some atheists do not believe in any “higher power”— they believe that even nature, with its tides and storms and diseases, will eventually be tamed by humankind. Some atheists reject any reliance on the supernatural, but accept the meaning and power of natural events.

Some people think Buddhists are atheists, because they do not worship the Christian god; some find gods in the Buddhist cosmology (not the Buddha, who is \*not\* a god, but many Buddhists include gods and heavens in their understanding of the universe) and therefore consider them theists.

One of our foremost Unitarian Universalist theologians, the Rev. Dr. Thandeka, identifies as a *Christian* nontheist. She follows the teachings of Jesus, but she does not believe in any deity.

Some believe that there were no atheists until the western Enlightenment; others point out that both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament have verses admonishing people who do not believe, so there must have been atheists then. [Psalm 14 & 53; 1Cor7, 2Cor] In fact, early Christians were accused of being atheists, because they did not believe in the gods that the rest of the culture embraced. According to wikipedia, the “first atheist” was a 5th-century BCE Greek philosopher named Diagoras, who strongly criticized religion and mysticism. The religion he criticized was not Christianity, but atheism is not just about Christianity.

Living in our culture, it is easy to make that mistake. Even Bertrand Russell, in our first reading, called his essay, “Why I Am Not A Christian,” although he also criticized Hinduism and Communism.

Finally, some atheists sink into nihilism and despair, and think that the absence of any good grants them permission to do anything they wish, while other atheists believe that the nonexistence of god puts the

responsibility on our shoulders. If the universe does not have a “sense of obligation” toward us, then we must take that obligation ourselves, and work together, to make our world a better place for all of us.

That is the kind of atheism I want to talk about, this morning.

I understand the necessity of criticizing religion. Some ridiculous and awful things have been done in its name. People have been abused, and tortured and killed; women and slaves and whole nations have been oppressed using the words of some sacred text as justification. Religious language has been used both to start wars and to keep people docile and subservient. All of that needs to be criticized.

When people build a museum dedicated to teaching that dinosaurs and Adam and Eve all lived at the same time, as they have just done, in Kentucky, within driving distance of over half of the population of the United States, when they keep their children ignorant of science and sex and other critical aspects of human life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then they need to be criticized.

When Oprah Winfrey publicizes a wish-fulfillment scheme like “The Secret” and millions of people buy into it, we need to criticize it. Another short digression: there is some truth to “The Secret.” If we have a positive outlook on life, we will be more likely to see an opportunity, and more likely to take advantage of that opportunity, than if we were pessimistic and convinced that nothing good could happen. But it is not the case that we can bring wealth or health or love into our lives, simply by focusing on it. And it is certainly not the case that if you are sick or oppressed, it is your own fault, because you are not focusing the proper energies on your situation. For the record, Oprah did change her mind about The Secret. But this is why we need more criticism, of these kinds of silliness and abuse, wrapped up in religious language.

All of that needs to be criticized and condemned.

But, as Heather pointed out in her Credo, that is a negative conception of atheism. It says what it rejects, but it does not define what it affirms. It does not, in Mary Zoll’s words, tell us what lets us sleep at night, despite our eventual sure death.

I want to talk about life-affirming atheism.

How many of you have seen the movie, “Touching the Void”? The movie is a true story, about how Joe Simpson and Simon Yates became the first two people to climb the treacherous south face of Peru’s Siula Grande mountain. They made it to the top, but as one of them says in the movie, “80% of injuries and deaths occur on the way down.” That’s when the climbers are the most tired, and when the daylight is fading.

Joe fell and broke his leg, limiting his mobility and causing him extraordinary pain. He told Simon to leave him, but Simon figured out a way for the two of them to continue descending. That worked for a while, but Joe eventually went crashing over the side, and hung there, helplessly swinging in the air. Joe’s dead weight immobilized Simon, and it was obvious that they might both die.

I was about to ask, what would you do, if your only chance at survival meant the death of your friend—would you want to die together, or sacrifice one so that the other might live— but I do not think we can know what we would do, unless we are actually in that horrible circumstance.

Simon cut the rope. Joe fell into a crevice, although Simon did not know that, because he was so far away. Simon just knew that Joe was gone, and he returned their base camp.

Interestingly, Joe did not die. Trapped in the crevice, he recalls thinking about his professed atheism. He half-expected to recant, to pray to some god—any god—whoever might be listening, just in case. But he did not. Instead, he started a grim journey that took almost a week. He had no food, and virtually no water, and his every movement caused him agony. And he kept moving. After several days, he got off the mountain, only to face a mile of jumbled boulders. He had to hop from one rock to the next, each hop jarring his broken leg. Each time, he swore he could not do any more. Each time, the force of Life within him made him get up and prepare for the next painful leap.

Eventually, Joe got close enough to their camp that Simon could hear his weak cries, and he was rescued.

That is the kind of atheism that matters most to me— the kind that helps us sleep at night, and do extraordinary things by day. This is the kind of atheism that answers a resounding “YES!” to the questions of ultimate concern.

Religion is a human activity. That does not make it less important, because it is not “handed down from on high.” In fact, I think it makes it more important, and more powerful, because it recognizes that we humans have the responsibility to care for ourselves and our world.

Religion is a human activity, and all theology is biography. Our beliefs come out of our experience. Again, there isn’t a supernatural source, there are only our lives, and our responses to the events in our lives.

If your life experience leads you to believe that there is something larger than yourself, working in or through you, then work with that. If your life thus far indicates that there is nothing larger than yourself, then work with that. As long as it helps you sleep, and gives you courage and hope, and encourages you to work with others, whatever they think, then embrace it and live it as fully and passionately as you can.

I will close with a quotation from the Rev. Matthew Johnson-Doyle, who serves the High Plains Church, UU, in Colorado Springs:

“[Y]es, we can and should do things that serve the needy. We can and should advocate for policies that uphold human dignity for all, and support those legislators and executives who enact and vote for those policies. We can and should show compassion and love in our personal lives and raise our children to do the same. These are good things. But sometimes they seem like not enough. Sometimes we wish for some cure, some magic, to fix what is broken. But if we are religious humanists, we know that such supernatural hopes are misplaced. Indeed, these longings can be dangerous, for they can permit the abuse of power in the name of our apocalyptic fantasies. It is the hard work – the human work – of service and witness and integrity that is possible, and that is [necessary.] Let us take to such work, then, with purpose and with a hope grounded in reality.”

So may we be.