

## WHAT DO ATHEISTS BELIEVE?

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson  
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"What Do Atheists Believe?" On the Sunday several weeks ago when I first announced my sermon stockpot on this question, one of you advised me, on your way out the door, "Before you can answer that question, I think you'll have to do some defining of terms." That sounds appropriately rational, so rational that it might just carry me through my entire answer.

An "atheist," in the common usage recorded in my dictionaries (I checked more than one), is often understood as "a person who denies or disbelieves the existence of (a God or gods)." (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language.*)

Gods, those authorities say, are understood to be "supernatural beings presiding over some portion of worldly affairs," and "God," is most often understood as "the one Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of the universe, regarded as eternal, infinite, all-powerful, and all-knowing."

Seems straightforward enough, doesn't it? But my adviser's wisdom is immediately demonstrated by Dr. Gordon Stein's introduction to An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism. "The average theologian" Stein says, "uses 'atheist' to mean a person who denies the existence of a God. Even an atheist would agree that some atheists (a small minority) would fit this definition," he continues. "However atheists would strongly dispute the adequacy of this definition. Rather, they would hold that an atheist is a person without a belief in God. ... To be without belief in God merely means that the term 'God' has no importance or possibly no meaning for you. Belief in God is not a factor in your life. Surely this is quite different from denying the existence of God. Atheism is not a belief as such. It is a lack of belief." (p.3)

So right away, before we even get past the definitions, we find a problem with our question. We're asking "What Do Atheists Believe?" and Dr. Stein is telling us that "Atheism," itself, does not posit beliefs, it simply describes the lack of a certain kind of belief. In this light, the answer to our question is simple enough: What Do Atheists Believe? Answer: whatever they want to or can believe, so long as it does not include a belief in God. Simple, but not very satisfying, I suspect. Theists, after all, claim God as the answer for some very meaningful questions. So what we really want to know is, for those very same questions, what answers do recommend themselves to those for whom God is not a satisfying answer. But because atheism itself doesn't answer those questions, we should expect different atheists' answers to them to differ as well, perhaps widely, indeed perhaps to coincide only in their lack of reference to God or gods.

So what questions, to which the theist answers "God", cry out just as loudly to those for whom God is not an answer? I suspect we might each pose those questions somewhat differently. I know I cast and recast my own several times before deciding how I could best express them here. Today, for me, they come out as these three:

First, I ask, what is the moral valence of existence, both human and trans-human? When I say moral valence of existence, I mean its value - the proportions of good and evil it contains - presently, and in capacity, and in propensity. When I say "of existence, both human and trans-human," I mean the moral valence of each human individual, of the human species as a whole, and of the orders of existence beyond and subsumed within the human sphere - from quarks to cosmoses. What is their value?

Second, then, I ask, how can we discern the character of existence, both human and trans-human? And when I say "the character of existence", I mean its composition (what it's made of), and its

dynamics, (how it works). I also mean its trajectory (where it comes from, where it's going, what path it's on), and I mean its governance (what guides it) - again in its human forms (both personal and social) and in its trans-human dimensions.

And third, then, I ask, how can we, as human beings, relate to our existence, both internally and externally, in the most rewarding manner, for one and all, both short-term and long-term?

I suspect those questions may be at least as hard for you to grasp at first hearing, at least in the way I mean them, as they were for me to formulate. Perhaps they'll become more comprehensible as I rehearse how a theist might answer them.

For the theist then, what is the fundamental moral valence of existence, both human and trans-human? Amidst the wide variance in theistic responses to this question, one commonality stands out. For theists, trans-human existence has a positive moral valence. God is, or the gods are, on balance, good. It's just another expression of the ancient rule that "might makes right." Theism evaluates the moral valence of human existence, personal and social, in a wide variety of ways, but one thing is clear and common to them all: morality is grounded outside humanity, in God.

And, how, by a theist's light, can we discern the character of existence, both human and trans-human? Most succinctly, the answer is: "ask the gods or God. They, he, she or it, know." If we want to know, we must access the communication lines of the supernatural being. Prayer, meditation, scriptural interpretation, conjuring, and divination are some well-known suggested means of such access.

And, finally, how, do theists say, can we human beings relate to our existence in the most rewarding manner? Again a simple answer is possible: by doing what the gods or God want us to do, either as already conveyed to us (through such media as scripture or oral history) or as continuously conveyed to us (through divinely ordained authority or personal inspiration.)

With that foundation, now, what answers to these questions might recommend themselves to us, without reference to gods or God?

What is the fundamental moral valence of existence, both human and trans-human? Well, with no superior valuing being beyond humanity, moral valuing appears suddenly to be entirely a human activity. Trans-human existence ("from quarks to cosmoses") has no intrinsic moral valence, it just is. Human existence, however, if there is any health in us, must have a positive moral valence, at least in capacity. And we determine the value of things beyond us, at least to us, either by individual or by social processes - probably by both.

And how, without reference to gods or God, can we discern the character of existence? We would seem able to do no better than to rely entirely on whatever human mechanisms for inquiry and truth-testing prove most reliable, however halting and imperfect. Over time, the hallmark most recognizable in such mechanisms has become public demonstration, as in science. It has proven more reliable than institutional imprimatur, whether from churches or states, and far more reliable than ancient origin. Private intuition, however, has often proved to be the inspiration which leads truth to public demonstration.

Finally, how can we, as human beings, relate to our existence, both internally and externally, in the most rewarding manner - for one and all, both short-term and long-term? Again, without any superior beings around who know better, we have only our own best collective wisdom to draw upon. At the very least, we can say that the broadest and most lasting rewards will require the fullest and longest possible human experience, both individual and collective. The core measuring stick for

evaluating our ways of relating would therefore seem to be their effect on the human species' longevity and development. Healthy individual and short-term rewards would seem to grow naturally only from this core.

These answers, I know are tightly packed. They bear much deeper explanation and illustration, which I trust other times and places will allow us. For this morning, still, just to answer these three questions, however meaningful, does not feel to me like a full answer to our question "What Do Atheists Believe?" There's much more in this question, and the tools to get at it involve even more defining of terms.

First, let's look even more closely at our understanding of atheists. Atheists are simply those who lack belief in a God. Commonly, Dr. Stein taught us, atheists are mistakenly assumed to deny the existence of a God, when in fact only a small minority of them do so. Perhaps just as commonly, I believe, atheists are mistakenly assumed to actively oppose belief in God, when an even smaller minority of them do so. It is one thing to find theism as extraneous to one's beliefs; it is quite another to find theism incompatible with one's beliefs; and it is yet quite a third thing to believe theism to actively threaten one's beliefs, to find theism pernicious, even, to the healthy and meaningful pursuit of human life. While I've never heard the term used elsewhere, I find it helpful to call this third position not atheism, but anti-theism. And I believe one is wise to move from atheism to anti-theism only with the greatest of care.

Almost 30 years ago Charles Stephen presented a sermon here entitled "The Religion of an Unbeliever." (April 30, 1972) There he noted that, given the variety within religion, "it is impossible not to be an unbeliever in someone's religion. ... We are all in that sense unbelievers, ... each of us is an unbeliever in the eyes of those whose beliefs we do not share." I want to suggest now that, given the variety of gods different theists believe in, it is impossible not to be an atheist regarding someone's god - many gods are logically incompatible. I would also say that it is highly improbable that we could avoid being anti-theist toward one or more gods - there are some nasty ones out there in "belief-land." At our sermon stockpot, we listed characteristics that at least one among us saw in "harmful theism." The list included judgmentalism, authoritarianism, limited inquiry, personal irresponsibility, and disaffirmation of life. I acknowledge that all these are present in some forms of theism, but to my eyes they clearly are not evident in all forms of theism. And when we move too quickly from perceiving (or even personally experiencing) harm in some forms of theism to assuming that this harm is intrinsic to all theism, we run two significant dangers. First, we risk being as unfair to all theists as some theists are to all atheists. Perhaps you know the old folk wisdom: "choose your enemies carefully, for the more strongly you oppose them the more you will become like them." Second, in making this precipitous step from atheism to anti-theism, we risk alienating ourselves, unnecessarily and tragically, from real allies who want to promote the kind of free, accepting, inquiring, responsible and life-affirming world-view which enlivens us. Remember, Gallup's polls repeated tell us that over 90% of Americans say they believe in "God," (completely undefined.) To make them all our enemies seems to me to choose our inevitable defeat.

Finally, let's look at the word in our question whose definition we've completely ignored up to now: What Do Atheists Believe? What do we mean when we ask what anyone "believes"?

In our common usage, my dictionaries tell me, to believe is "to have confidence in the truth, the existence, or the reliability of something, without absolute proof that one is right in doing so." (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*) Just over 10 years ago, in a sermon entitled "The Faith of an Agnostic" (October 29, 1989), Charles reminded us of Thomas Huxley's understanding of the term he coined. "Agnosticism," said Huxley, "is not properly described as a 'negative' creed, nor indeed, as a creed of any kind, except in so far as it expresses absolute faith in the validity of a principle, which is as much ethical as intellectual. This principle may be stated (as

follows): it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

Charles concluded that sermon saying "Agnosticism is not a faith for everyone." (p.4) I disagree. I believe that agnosticism is the sine qua non of anyone's responsible search for truth and meaning. What's true of us, as our colleague Sarah Campbell wrote in *What Unitarian Universalists Believe*, must also be true of all valid believers "*I do not know*' ... may be a conclusion for some, but for (us) it is where we begin." (p.47) As Charles said, "The agnostic is a doubter, but he is not necessarily a scoffer. ... Each of us ... lives by certain beliefs that cannot be fully proven. They are subject to change ... plausible hypotheses." It is this faith which "enables us, without all the answers, to live intensely and effectively, and to develop convictions and to live by them and act upon them." (p.4)

If to believe is "to have confidence in the truth, the existence, or the reliability of something," then it is our actual, active reliance on something which makes it a meaningful belief. So

- if I do not rely on a divine creator, I can still rely on the creativity of existence, impersonal though it appears. I rely on its power to become more and more complex, more and more sophisticated, more and more subtle, more and more interdependent, and above all, more and more beautiful.
- if I do not rely on a supreme ruler, I can still rely on rules, natural laws, which govern and guide existence. Their impersonal immutability is the very basis for my confidence that I can eventually work my way into a full and far-sighted rewarding relationship with existence.
- if I do not rely on an eternal God, or indeed on any form of eternity, I can still rely on humanity's proven capacity, metaphorically captured by Tennessee Williams to "snatch the eternal from the desperately fleeting."
- and if I do not rely on an all-powerful, all-seeing, everywhere-present God, I can still rely on our proven human capacities to act in concert with powers beyond our own, to see beyond the here and now, and to extend our presence into lives other than our own - all meshing almost seamlessly into the rich creativity of existence itself.

But (or and) only partially paradoxically, I do rely on a God. To be sure, you can't find my God defined in common current usage in my dictionaries. There's no person, or being, creator, ruler, eternal, all-powerful, all-seeing or everywhere-present God in my beliefs. To find my God defined you'll have to look in the etymological notes - all the way back to the word's most ancient root, the ancient indo-european word "ghawa", which means "to call out to, or to invoke." God, at root, was an action, not a person or even a thing; a verb, not a noun. For me, there is still vibrant life in that ancient root, even if the plant which grew from it has long since died. To God - or God-ing, "ghawa-ing" - to cry out, to name, to seek connection with power and value beyond our own is an action upon which I rely, an undertaking in which I believe profoundly. H. Richard Niebuhr, a mid-twentieth century theologian, wrote "To deny the reality of a supernatural being called God is one thing; to live without confidence in some center of value and without loyalty to a cause is another." Atheism, in its lack of belief, has its dangerous perversions - skepticism sliding toward cynicism, freedom broaching on flightiness, contentment tinge-ing with condescension, self-direction eroding toward self-absorption. Goding, for me - calling out (to use William Blake's image, "in human form divine" - is atheism's (dare I say) salvation.

"What is important," Sarah Campbell has written, "is that we order our lives in relationship to something that calls us beyond our knowing -- something that enables us to live creatively in the quest without getting mired in the questions." (*What U.U.s Believe*. p.49)

With Ralph Waldo Emerson, "I count these to be low, sleepy dark ages of the soul only redeemed by the unceasing affirmation at the bottom of the heart - like the nightingale's song heard all night - that the powers of the (human) soul are commensurate with its needs ..."