

“Atheism: Faith without God”

Franz Gross -- November 4, 2007

“I do not believe in God.” When I first uttered these words in this church more than 15 years ago I think they had some shock value. With the emergence of the recent public face of atheism, I don't think they do any more. (How many of you are uneasy to hear that statement uttered from the pulpit of this church?)

Am I unusual? How many atheists are there in the world? Well, this is hard to measure. It seems that atheists are not eager to identify themselves; many who do not believe in God will NOT say they are an atheist. Others, who have no church or claim to have no religion, STILL believe in God, so it would be wrong to call them atheists. One web site I found reports that about 16% of the world's population are “non-believers” the third largest group following Christianity (33%) and Islam (20%). Of these “non-believers” only about one-third, or about 5% of the world's population, are atheists. By the same count, somewhere between 3 to 9 million Americans are atheists, giving the US the 7th largest population of non-believers in the world, just behind France.

Among UU members, the percentage of Atheists is slightly higher. If the national average holds for our church, about 14 to 20 of us would be willing to be called atheists. Are you one of them?

Clearly, the American UU church, with only about 150,000 members, has a great potential for growth. If we could attract even a small number of the 3 - 9 million atheists in the US we would grow substantially. But why would I, or others who call themselves atheists, want to come to a UU church?

About a year ago, I drifted into active participation as a Worship Associate. I thought I was interested because I was temporarily out of church work, and wanted to get to know Jennifer and Preston. After one of our meetings, one Worship Associate, who has uniquely personal experiences with God and represents my polar opposite, asked me in a curious way “Why do you come to church if you do not believe in God?” This stopped me. “Well, I'll have to think about that and get back to you” I said. I felt a little embarrassed not to know the answer. You see, I had wrestled with this question before I was 20, but had not thought seriously about it for 50 years! I used to think I was only interested in our church because I wanted to build and maintain an institution for others. But I think I was fooling myself; there is more to it than that.

I grew up in Buffalo, NY. After the Second World War, Buffalo had, for a brief time, the largest Polish population in the world, and it was always strongly Catholic. For a time the public schools had a practice called “released time;” every Wednesday afternoon students would be released from school to receive religious education from their church of choice. If you had no church to go to, you had to stay in school. As it turned out, only two of us were left behind, and the teacher made us write, over and over again, the spelling words we had missed. At this time I was an excellent speller, and had missed only one word, which I wrote over 650 times. I tried to persuade the teacher to let me do something else, but she was inflexible (I think she disapproved of me). Fortunately, I missed another word in the second semester, so had a new word to practice. I am happy to report to you that I learned my lesson: I am now a terrible speller!

In this environment it was easy to be singled out; my classmates asked me, in a not so friendly manner, why I did not go to church. My answer, that I did not believe in God, was met with disbelief and ridicule: “what DID I believe in?” “Who made the world?” and, most troubling of all, “Without God, how could I tell right from wrong?” I never could answer this last question very well, and was troubled by this commonly held view: that atheists must be evil because they have no God to guide them. Was it really true that I must be an evil person if I did not believe in God?

This understanding of atheism as evil lives on. In a recent edition of the “Last Word” a caller complaining about someone’s view that our country is not based on Christianity, concludes with the sentence “If its atheism you yearn for, you should consider the accomplishments of some notable atheists of the last century: Hitler, Stalin and chairman Mao, who together are responsible for the deaths of perhaps more than 70 million people.” Wow.

In some ways I envy those who have “seen” God. But if you have not had those experiences, how can you make yourself believe? Nothing in my experience convinces me that there is a God. As May Sarton says: “yours to be the anarchist.” Even Mother Teresa was troubled by doubt: “I am told God lives in me — and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.” In another letter she said: “In my own soul, I feel the terrible pain of this loss. I feel that God does not want me, that God is not God and that he does not really exist.” Surely it would have been better for Mother Teresa if she had not wanted to believe. But think: would she have served humanity if she had NOT been a member of an organized church and had NOT tried to believe in God? I wonder.

Beliefs are powerful, but they can be changed. I believed at one time that electrons followed a definite path as they traveled through space. I learned with painful difficulty when I was 19 years old that this was not so, but that does not change the fact that I once absolutely believed the opposite. My earlier belief was wrong, and I was fortunate to learn otherwise.

Similarly, some day I may have an experience that will change my present belief about God, but until that time, I do not believe. I am NOT an agnostic. I am not 'uncertain' that there is, or is not, a God. I have a belief, and just because I realize that this belief might change sometime in the future does NOT mean that I have no opinion, or that I doubt my present opinion. Until such a time may come, if it ever does, I prefer, along with Laplace, the famous 18th century French mathematician, who, when asked about God, is reputed to have said, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

Many people are proud, in an "in-your-face" sort of way, to call themselves atheists. Did you know that the "Freedom from Religion Foundation," a group of Atheists and agnostics, now numbers 11,300 members? At its 30th annual meeting this year, non-believers held a raffle for US dollars manufactured before 1957, before the words "in God we trust" were added to US bills. Recent books by Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins have adopted a strident, anti-God point of view. And why not? What evidence is there that God exists? And think of all the harm that has been done to humanity in His name: from hundreds of years of Christian crusades, to the inquisitions, and, now, the intra-Islamic conflict raging in Iraq. Why would an atheist be interested in our church?

But I believe it is dangerous to be too certain and self satisfied. Anne Stevens recounted her personal journey away from Atheism to something different, perhaps a belief in a greater power. We are all on similar journeys, and I cannot be sure that someday I might find myself walking with her. I think I must agree with John Dietrich, a leader in introducing humanism into Unitarianism, who wrote "my philosophy and religion have undergone considerable, if not drastic revision. I realize now how my utter reliance upon science and reason, and my contempt for any intuitive insights and intangible values, which are the very essence of art and religion, was a great mistake; and the way in which I cut mankind off from all cosmic relationship was very short-sighted and arrogant."

If we could believe in God, if our God were tolerant of people of all faiths, and if we knew what God wanted us to do, it might help indeed. But is it necessary – can we believe in something else?

Its a wonderful world that John Lennon describes:

Imagine there's no heaven,
It's easy if you try,
No hell below us,
Above us only sky,
Imagine all the people
living for today...

Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do,
Nothing to kill or die for,
No religion too,
Imagine all the people
living life in peace...

To believe in something we cannot prove is called “faith.” An atheist may not believe in God, but he can certainly believe in the Golden Rule: “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” And although I am an atheist, I have faith in the ultimate goodness of humanity and ultimate justice in life (much harder to believe, sometimes). All of these beliefs require faith; can we know (without faith) that the golden rule is the right way to live? I think not.

The Golden Rule – remarkable and simple! While it requires some element of faith in humankind, there may even be rational, scientific reasons for embracing it. Dr Haidt at the University of Virginia has found that people seem to possess primitive moral gut reactions that generate split-second decisions to enhance survival in a dangerous world.* He has identified five components of morality that are common to most cultures and seem to be instinctive, INSTINCTIVE: Two of these components protect individuals: one of these concerns preventing harm to the person and the other with reciprocity and fairness (the golden rule!). Three others promote behaviors that strengthen the group. These are loyalty, respect for authority and hierarchy, and a sense of purity or sanctity. In Dr. Haidt’s view, these are innate psychological mechanisms that predispose children to absorb certain virtues, suggesting that these are part of our genetic makeup.

* The ideas and some of the words presented in this paragraph come from “Is ‘Do Unto Others’ Written Into Our Genes?” an article by Nicholas Wade published in the New York Times, September 18, 2007.

It is easy to see why such instincts could have evolved – without such behaviors we could not bind together into the social structure that gives so much beauty and meaning to our lives. This social structure gives us a community of caring, and arts and sciences built and preserved by the human drive for knowledge.

I used to abhor the word “faith.” As a scientist and an atheist I wanted to believe that there was no place for “faith.” BUT, even in science we believe in the existence of laws of nature, and hold the belief that the laws in this part of the universe are no different from those in distant parts of the universe. As with so many ideas (words), what am I to call the belief in universal law except “faith.” True, by “faith” I mean something very different from the theist, who often uses “faith” to mean the belief in God.

But what about God? Why can't I say that God, to me, is the belief in nature and natural law. I suppose I could say this, but I think this is one time when I cannot co-opt the religious word to describe what I believe. To do so is to obscure an important difference that is worth discussing and examining. So I am an atheist.

Atheists are not troubled by irrelevant unknown questions about the nature of God, or the restrictions She places on our life. They simply focus on what is important – our deeply held values. To my mind, most of our experiences as UU's do not require God. Look at the UU principles outlined in our responsive reading this morning -- how many require God (none I think).

In recent weeks, as I participated in worship and listened to sermons, I was also thinking about what I would say today, and I realized that messages about living in the present, bearing witness, and caring for the earth do not depend on what we believe about God. In the loving and supportive community we find here, differences in our beliefs about God are mostly irrelevant, even if, in the world outside, these differences may set us against each other.

And – why would I want to try to make myself believe in God? Belief might have helped me be more socially acceptable to my 6th grade friends, but this is hardly worth the energy wasted on arguing and fighting over the question of whether or not, as stated in the Catholic catechism “Christ ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father.” (The “right hand,” no less.) Thus atheism has a positive face. It offers a great freedom, far greater than any freedom, if it exists, to be evil.

So, I return once again, to my main question: why would I, or any atheist, with this great freedom, want to come to church? The answer to this basic question lies at the core of our being. To live a full and rich life we must be part of a larger group which can offer us music, literature, and science. Full membership in the larger group requires that we live moral lives. This, in turn, requires personal effort. How are we to find the way without the help of our friends?

Today, the Congress is having an academic discussion of waterboarding. Is it torture, or is it simply an “enhanced interrogation technique” (whatever that may be)? We may think this is a conversation taking place in 2007, but really it is more appropriate to 1984. Working at home on my physics research, in the blissful isolation of a privileged existence, I can easily ignore the discussion, or think of it only in academic terms. But when I come to church, and think of bearing witness, I cannot easily hide from my outrage, which comes directly from the confrontation of my spirituality with reality.

Here, in this church, we may find the resolve to act – we have a religion that “teaches our hearts to hope and our hands to serve.” We may strive together to achieve the grand ideals expressed in one of my favorite hymns:

“When tyrants tremble as they hear the bells of freedom ringing,

when friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?”

This is why this atheist is a UU. Amazingly, this atheist is here for the same reasons as anyone else. I, like the rest of you, need the help of this supportive community to show me the way to the full life I seek, and to help me find a way to be the just and caring person I want, and need, to be. I cannot do this on my own – I need this community. We cannot do it alone.

May it be so.