

Call to Worship: Little Book of Atheist Spirituality by Andre Comte-Sponville ¹

Frankly, do you need to believe in God to be convinced that sincerity is preferable to dishonesty, courage to cowardice, generosity to egoism, gentleness and compassion to violence and cruelty, justice to injustice, love to hate? Of course not! Those who believe in God recognize these values in God--or perhaps God in them. Such is the traditional setup: People's faith and their fidelity go hand in hand, and I wouldn't dream of holding it against them. But why shouldn't those of us who are without faith be able to recognize the human grandeur of these values--their urgent importance, their vital necessity, their extreme fragility--and respect them because of all these qualities?

Time for All Ages: Tales of Hasidim by Martin Buber, Vol. 2 ²

Why Did God Create Atheists?

There is a famous story told in Chassidic literature that addresses this very question. The Master teaches the student that God created everything in the world to be appreciated, since everything is here to teach us a lesson.

One clever student asks “What lesson can we learn from atheists? Why did God create them?”

The Master responds “God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all — the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that God commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right.”

“This means,” the Master continued “that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never say ‘I pray that God will help you.’ Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say ‘I will help you.’”

¹ Comte-Sponville André. (2008). *The little book of atheist spirituality*. Penguin Books.

² Buber, M., & Marx, O. (1964). *Tales of the Hasidim*. Schocken Books.

Sermon: What Are the Blessings of Atheism? How Does It Shape Our Faith?

Atheism is a venerable tradition with roots in ancient Greece and India. Atheism in the USA is protected under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause. Our founding fathers held fast to freedom, freedom to believe or not to believe in God, the separation of church and state, and prohibition against discrimination of religious belief. Yet, atheism has often been punishable by imprisonment or death, which helps us understand why atheists in certain times and places tend to whisper. Are you an atheist who whispers? Europeans were executed and tortured in the 16th and 17th century for atheist beliefs. Today atheists are killed in places like Iran and Nigeria. Atheism got the poet Percy Shelley kicked out of Oxford in 1811. Early feminists felt religion was an obstacle to women's rights. You may be familiar with the famous quote by Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "The bible and the church have been the greatest stumbling block in the way of women's emancipation." And I believe they still are, or we would not be fighting for a woman's right to choose today.

In his Ted Talk, *Militant Atheism*, Richard Dawkins tells this story:

"In 1987, a reporter asked George Bush, Sr. whether he recognized the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are atheists. Mr. Bush's reply has become infamous. 'No, I don't know that atheists should be considered citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.' Bush's bias was not an isolated mistake, blurted out in the heat of the moment and later retracted. He stood by it in the face of repeated calls for clarification or withdrawal. He really meant it. He knew it posed no threat to his election, quite the contrary. Democrats as well as Republicans parade their religiousness if they want to get elected. Both parties invoke 'one nation under God.'" ³

According to recent polls 13 % of people worldwide identify as atheist which is double that of the USA. The highest reported share of self-described atheists is in China: an astounding 68% percent. Last year a worldwide survey reported that having no religious affiliation is now the world's third biggest 'faith' after Christianity and Islam. Religion is breaking down everywhere due to mind blowing scientific discoveries, sex and money scandals, the inability of old traditions to deal with contemporary culture, and the negative political impact religion has on basic human rights. No wonder atheism is on the rise. Polling of UUs is vague, ranging from 2% to 50% depending on groups polled and if you include agnostics and humanists. Some of our congregations are more theistic, some more humanist. I am reminded of the only time my mother attended church at First Parish. After the service she said: "I loved it – the rituals, the people, the music, the sermon. "There was only one thing missing," she said "What?" I anxiously replied, "God," she whispered.

³ Richard Dawkins, You Tube, *Militant Atheism* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxGMqKCCn6A>

I identified as an atheist for most of my twenties. The Jesuits at Boston College where I was an undergrad convinced me that God did not exist through their teachings of philosophy, psychology, and logic. My father always said BC ruined me, meaning that it opened my mind to new ideas. The idea of no-God made sense to me at the time. I never believed in the Judeo-Christian God. My education gave me the freedom to question my beliefs and question the existence of God. Yet my studies did not give me enough information to calm my inquisitive spirit. My seeking led me to Buddhism which worked out perfectly because it is a non-theistic religion. Buddhism gave me a practice and a community and sacred texts. I was good to go. It worked for a while until I got restless again. I wanted to make sense of the mystical and transcendental experiences I was having in my life through dreams, meditation, and time in nature. Then I found our faith where I could bring all my beliefs and questions. Here is where I encountered religious atheists, people who did not believe in God, but belonged to a faith community. I found their beliefs refreshing. Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz, human rights activist and President Emeritus of the UU Service Committee, writes of these beliefs:

- We believe that human beings are responsible for the future; that history is in our hands, not those of an angry God or inexorable fate.
- We believe that life's blessings are available to everyone, not just those who can recite a certain catechism.
- And we believe that those blessings are made manifest to us not just in the "miraculous" or extraordinary but in the simple pleasures of the everyday.

How much are you enjoying the simple pleasures of the everyday? It is hard to pinpoint when atheism became a viable part of our Living Tradition, but Unitarianism was strongly influenced by humanist thought in the 1930s. Humanism shifted the focus of our faith towards the use of reason and science in understanding humanity. Unitarian religious humanists were prominent in our denomination. Charlotte Anna Perkins Gilman, writer, feminist and proponent of social reform wrote a poem conveying her atheistic sentiments.

Whatever is,
we only know
As in our minds we find it so;
No staring fact is half so clear
As one dim, preconceived idea --
No matter how the fact may glow.

Vainly may Truth her trumpet blow
To stir our minds; like heavy dough
They stick to what they think — won't hear
Whatever is.

Our ancient myths in solid row
Stand up — we simply have to go
 And choke each fiction old and dear
 Before the modest facts appear;
Then we may grasp, reluctant, slow,
 Whatever is.

Whatever it is we believe is just a perspective. Even our most ingrained views are simply our limited understanding of something based on our life experience. None of us is right and none of us is wrong. We know this. Even though at times we may feel strongly about our ideas and disagree with others, we strive to honor one another in our spiritual process and support each other in our search for truth and meaning. Therefore, we are sitting here this morning, instead of any other place of worship in town. Down the road people are worshipping God. Our focus is not the worship of God, but we UUs gather each week to explore the mystery of humanity and the universe.

Atheism is part of our search for truth and meaning. It offers a counterbalance to the religiosity that has gotten out of hand. Whether someone is an atheist, or a theist does not determine whether they are compassionate, moral, kind, justice seeking, or non-judgmental. We can think of examples in our personal lives. Atheism also doesn't guarantee good behavior among our leaders any more than religion does. There are plenty of examples of corruption and immorality in positions of unchecked power, both by atheists (such as Mao Zedong in China, Joseph Stalin in the USSR, and Pol Pot in Cambodia) and theists (such as Adolf Hitler in Germany, Francisco Franco in Spain, and Idi Amin in Uganda).⁴

Atheism like theism has soft and hard groups, angry and loving adherents. We have the hard-core atheists like Hitchens, Harris, and Dawkins who Vincent Bugliosi, author of *Divinity or Doubt*, refers to as intellectual polished writers who do not confront most of the major issues (of atheism) or present an intelligent sound case for their positions. Although I love what Richard Dawkins says in his Ted Talk, "In practice, what is an atheist? An atheist is just somebody who feels about Yahweh the way any decent Christian feels about Thor or Baal or the golden calf. As has been said before, we are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one God further."⁵

⁴ <https://www.dummies.com/article/body-mind-spirit/religion-spirituality/atheism/the-history-of-atheism-165810/>

⁵ Richard Dawkins, You Tube, Militant Atheism <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxGMqKcCn6A>

Then we have the soft-core atheists like Andre Comte-Sponville author of our opening words who brings the atheist/believer debate to a higher level and Alain de Bottom's *Religion for Atheists* which calls us to adopt religion's pedagogy of community, relationships, ritual, music, beauty, and emotional stability and build museums named the Gallery of Compassion or the Gallery of Fear.

We welcome atheists in our UU congregations just as we welcome theists and agnostics and all seekers of truth into our uncommon religion. But I often wonder if we as UU's talk about our beliefs and if not, is it because we do not want to shake things up with one another? Perhaps, if we speak to each other about our beliefs, listen to each other, and really hear and understand one another's perspective, we will grow and change and get in touch more deeply with our own beliefs.

For now, we can be grateful for the many blessings of atheism:

- Atheism is the purest essence of one flavor of the unorthodoxy that we Unitarian Universalists cherish
- In a world plagued by -isms that claim to have The Answer, atheism serves as a counterweight, as long as it doesn't become its own Answer, then it is no better than the religiosity that it mocks.
- Atheism provides a context and container for people who doubt their faith
- Atheism inspires reason & intellect, research & science in our quest
- Atheism helps us accept our mortality and the idea of nothingness
- Atheism frees us up to focus on the fate of the world
- Atheism is a form of humility of surrender of letting go
- And finally, atheism forces us to find peace and healing, justice and restoration in humanity.

So perhaps when we see pain and suffering, and we are grasping for whatever is, we can become an atheist imagining there is no God who can help, so choose to help. Because when we prefer sincerity to dishonesty, courage to cowardice, generosity to egoism, gentleness and compassion to violence and cruelty, justice to injustice, love to hate, then it does not matter what we believe.

A few days ago, my daughter who was not indoctrinated into a belief in God despite my mother's attempts, asked me what I was preaching about today. "Atheism," I said. With a hint of desperation in her breath she asked: "Do atheists have faith?" "Yes," I said, "some do." Faith does not need a deity or a temple, a belief in someone or something. Faith is beyond any theism. The conclusiveness and rationalism of both theism and atheism can keep us in our heads. And faith puts us in our hearts, implying a basic trust in the spirit of life, in our great mother earth and in each other. Faith is, as Roger Housden writes in *Keeping the Faith Without the Religion*, "a nonrational intuition of the truth, goodness, and beauty that are intrinsic to life and that lie alongside the darkness in any human heart."⁶

All our hearts need soothing at times. May this faith, our faith as Unitarian Universalists, and this community of seekers gathered today be our healing balm so we can use our faith to bring light to the heart of humanity and build the common good.

Closing Words: by Algernon Black, a liberal social critic, delivered in the 1950's at the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

This is a call to the living,
To those who refuse to make peace with evil,
With the suffering and the waste of the world.
This is a call to the human, not the perfect,
To those who know their own prejudices,
Who have no intention of becoming prisoners of their own limitations.
This is a call to those who remember the dreams of their youth,
Who know what it means to share food and shelter,
The care of children and those who are troubled,
To reach beyond barriers of the past
Bringing people to communion.
This is a call to the never-ending spirit
Of the common man, his essential decency and integrity,
His unending capacity to suffer and endure,
To face death and destruction and to rise again
And build from the ruins of life.
This is the greatest call of all
The call to a faith in people.

⁶ Housden, R. (2014). *Keeping the faith without a religion*. Sounds True (p. x)