

Embracing Atheism ©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Today I want to focus on a subject that generally isn't spoken of positively in the vast majority of Sunday sermons. The subject I am referring to is atheism. As many of you likely know, God is the foundation upon which the vast majority of churches are built. It is understandable then that in most churches there would be an expectation that God would be at the center of the sermon either directly or indirectly. With God as the foundation of the church and the center of the sermon, it would seem there wouldn't be much room in most churches for atheism. In many, if not most, Unitarian Universalist churches however, God isn't the center of attention. So today I would like to speak about atheism and speak about it in positive terms. In doing so, I am certain that I won't be invited to deliver this sermon in most churches in Bozeman, in Montana or, for that matter, throughout this country.

On the very first page of the Bylaws of our national body, the Unitarian Universalist Association, in the section titled "Principles," it is made very clear that God isn't the only or the primary source from which we seek wisdom and guidance. About mid-way through the section titled "Principles" is the following statement, "The living tradition we share draws from many sources." That sentence is followed by what are often referred to as the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism. These can be found on the back of your Order of Service. You will notice that only one of the statements, the fourth one, refers specifically to "God." And then it is to a specific attribute of God — "God's love." Other sources include "direct experience," "words and deeds of prophetic men and women," and "the guidance of reason and the results of science" to name a few. Because of this openness to a variety of sources, our UU tradition is considered to be out of the "main stream" of religious thought. Yet while we aren't in the "main stream," we honor and celebrate a number of "main stream" religious holidays.

As many of you know, next Sunday is Easter which is a Christian holiday that commemorates the life and death of Jesus. Many people believe that he was a man who was the very incarnation of God. So as I thought about the upcoming Easter service and the membership of this congregation I realized that I had an opportunity this month to acknowledge and address two very different systems of belief. Those systems of belief are theism, a belief in God, and atheism, which is generally understood to be a belief that there is no God or gods.

Most people today would claim these two systems of belief are exclusive of one another. But I would suggest that it might be helpful to look more deeply into the meaning of the word atheism. Almost all contemporary dictionaries define atheism as the belief that there is no God, or denial that God or gods exist. This describes what most people in this day and age understand atheism to be. But if we consider the word atheism over the course of history, we discover a somewhat different conception of the word. In our reading this morning we heard Karen Armstrong make the claim that "The statement 'I do not believe in God' has meant something slightly different at each period of history. The people who have been dubbed 'atheists' over the years have always denied a particular conception of the divine." "A particular conception of the divine." To

me, this is the important difference between Armstrong's description of atheism and the definition you will find in most contemporary dictionaries.

Throughout her book, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Armstrong identifies what atheism has meant throughout the time period she covers. According to her, our current understanding of what atheism means actually emerged relatively recently, in the nineteenth century. Prior to that time the word atheism referred to a lack of belief in some particular attribute or concept of God. This perspective is congruent with the way the late Forrest Church, a Unitarian Universalist minister, author and theologian conceived of atheism. In one of his books he tells of how, when someone would state they didn't believe in God he would ask the person to tell him about the God they didn't believe in. He would then state, "I probably don't believe in that God either."

Earlier in our service we had an example of denial related to a particular concept of God. The example was in our Story for All Ages this morning, *Me and Dog*. The story is about Sid's disbelief in one specific thing often attributed to God, namely sovereignty. As I began searching for a story for today's service I was initially concerned that I wouldn't be able to find an appropriate and meaningful story. I was delighted, and relieved, when I came upon this book, published in 2014, by two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author, Gene Weingarten. Weingarten writes of how Murphy, the dog, views Sid as the "Supreme Almighty Ruler. Super-duper boss and king of absolutely everything." This is a perspective that many people hold about God. It is the rejection, the denial of this or some other attribute of God that Armstrong is referring to when she claims, "The people who have been dubbed 'atheists' over the years have always denied a **particular conception** of the divine."

Some of you might think that this idea of God as a supreme, almighty ruler is an essential element of every belief system regarding God. You might think that but it isn't the case. Within the framework known as process theology for example, God is considered to be neither supreme nor supernatural. So while it might seem that the message in our story fits the dictionary definition of atheism, it is, in actuality, much more in line with Armstrong's historical perspective on atheism.

But whether the message in the story better matches with contemporary dictionaries or Armstrong is less important than what these two ways of defining atheism have in common. I am referring here to a commonality that creates a significant problem for anyone who claims to be an atheist. That commonality is the fact that atheism is a denial or a disbelief of something specifically related to God. Let's consider for a moment how this might be a problem for a person who claims to be an atheist.

As we consider the problems being an atheist might involve it would be helpful for us to first have a context to start from. Here then is some relevant information from the Pew Research Center's 2014 survey of more than 35,000 US adults regarding their religious views. In that survey, 89% of the respondents claimed to hold a belief in God. That is down slightly from a similar survey in 2007 that found 92% of the respondents held a belief in God. It is fair to say that 89% is a significant majority of the population. From these numbers a person might initially think the remaining 11% of the respondents are atheists. Not so! Most of that 11% are agnostic. Agnostics believe that we just can't know for certain whether or not God exists. All we can know for certain is that which is materially provable. While an agnostic and a person who believes in God hold distinctly

different perspectives, those perspectives aren't on the far ends of the belief continuum. As I mentioned earlier, atheism is commonly understood to be a denial that God exists at all. With that definition as a starting point then, if you are an atheist you hold a belief which is in direct opposition to something almost nine out of ten adults in this country believe to be true, namely that God exists.

So starting with that as our context let's put ourselves in the shoes of an atheist. To accomplish this I would invite you to engage in a thought exercise. Imagine for a moment going around disagreeing in some significant way with nine out of ten people you encounter. Take a few moments to picture various ways this could play out. Notice the reactions others have toward you. Also notice how you might begin to feel. This exercise can give us an idea of one reason that many people have a very negative opinion about someone they perceive to be an atheist. As our story implied, often when someone holds a belief in God, the sense of what is moral, what is right or wrong, is intricately interwoven with that person's conception of God. Because what is moral is so tangled with conceptions of God, atheists have frequently been considered to be morally suspect or even morally deficient. Over the past few decades research has definitively shown that, generally speaking, atheists are no less moral than someone who believes in God. In spite of the research however, atheists are typically at the very bottom when it comes to public acceptance and approval. Atheists are down there with used car dealers, those who do telephone solicitation and politicians. Actually, politicians are viewed more positively since a politician can get elected to the highest office of this country. An atheist, on the other hand, doesn't stand a snowball's chance in — the Sahara Desert at noon in mid-summer.

My hope is that this little thought exercise gives us all a sense of how difficult it can be in this country to claim to be an atheist. I would ask you to take this thought exercise a bit further. Imagine, if you would, that you believe there is no God. Now picture yourself walking into a church on Sunday morning. As you do this remember how I stated at the outset that in most churches a focus on God would be an expectation. How comfortable would you feel about sharing your belief? Would you feel comfortable or safe stating openly that you are an atheist?

As Unitarian Universalists who are out of the "main stream" of religious thought we aren't just tolerant of atheism and atheists, we are welcoming and supportive. Our First Principle speaks to the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." Our Third Principle encourages "acceptance of one another." Our Fourth Principle asserts that we value "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." None of our Principles or our source statements assume or require a person to hold a specific belief about any concept of God. I believe our ability to welcome, support and honor those who hold a minority belief is a very good example of why Unitarian Universalism is referred to as a liberal faith tradition. We are willing to challenge prejudice and address discrimination based on all manner of things, including what view a person holds regarding the subject of God. As time progresses may we, as Unitarian Universalists, continue to be at the forefront of those seeking, as our Sixth Principle states, the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." With open hearts and minds let us work together as we strive to attain that goal, no matter what we may or may not believe on the matter of God.

May it be so.