

Atheists in Church? – Come on in!  
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg  
Rev. Dave Hunter  
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I've done, from time to time, sermons about God. But the challenge I gave myself for this morning is to preach a sermon on the absence of God, the denial of God. How do I do that? One of the ideas that floated through my mind during my solitary, somewhat absented-minded brain storming was to do a God sermon, but do it standing on my head. After a few attempts, I decided there must be a better solution than that.

Here's another way to start. Now let me say right away that you don't have to answer this question, it's up to you. But here's my question. How many of you are atheists? Raise your hand.

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Tenth grade was an exciting time for me. My first year in high school. I got my start as a high school athlete, running on the cross country team, and then on the track team. In the spring of that year I turned sixteen and claimed my driver's license. With two friends from my English class, Don and Jim, I explored the Detroit Public Library and a neighboring book store, Marwell's. And in the back of a magazine we found at Marwell's was an ad for a little book: it was called *An Atheist's Manifesto*.<sup>1</sup> All three of us ordered copies, and I read it eagerly.

Skipping over a few decades, when I arrived at Wesley Theological Seminary in the fall of 1997, about 40 years later, I realized that there was little if anything to be gained by declaring myself an atheist, but, still, I wanted to help these Methodists understand their intellectual errors.

By the way, during that first year at Wesley, when I was still working full time at the Department of Justice, I took a course in drama. One of our assignments was to write a short play, which we then presented in class. Whenever someone's play included God as a character, I was asked to take that role. Was it because I was a middle-aged white male, or did they realize that a Unitarian Universalist would be less concerned than others about getting struck by lightning for hubris or idolatry?

It wasn't until my sixth and final year, in Systematic Theology, that I found a course in which we could have basic philosophical and theological discussions of the nature and existence of God. Or I thought that we would finally get down to basics in that course. But it doesn't work that way. In the Christian world of the seminary, the existence of God is a given.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Lewis, *An Atheist Manifesto* (1954).

If you look in the Bible, what you do *not* find there are arguments for the existence of God, or theological discussion of what it means to say that God created the world. You would no more seek to prove the existence of God than you would your mother. Jesus had a personal, intimate relationship with God; it would not have occurred to Jesus to try to prove that God exists.

As you may have noticed, atheism has become quite a popular topic in recent years – atheism, and the related topics of those who respond “none” when asked about their religion, or those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious,”<sup>2</sup> or those who argue that congregations are things of the past, we need to move on to their successors. But let’s stay focused on atheism, and, don’t worry, I’m not going to give you book reports on all the new atheism books I haven’t read yet.<sup>3</sup>

Taking the middle path, at Wesley, between the three-in-one Trinitarian God of traditional Christianity and the atheism of the mildly rebellious teenager, I acknowledged that I was a post-humanist, metaphorical theist. But last year, in preparing the sermon on “Why is there something rather than nothing?” I expanded that theological self-description, calling myself a quasi-mystical, post-humanist, metaphorical theist.

And in preparing this sermon, a few days ago, I amended that label. Now my theological pigeon hole is that of an *unfinished quasi-mystical, post-humanist, metaphorical theist*.

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OK, let’s get down to business. What is the world view of the atheist? Perhaps I should say the philosophical world view. In particular, I’m thinking of an atheist of our era, in a land

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<sup>2</sup> See “Examining the Growth of the ‘Spiritual but Not Religious,’” New York Times, 7/19/14, A14, discussing Lillian Daniel, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough* (2013); Linda A. Mercadante, *Beliefs Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (2014); Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (2010); Thomas Moore, *A Religion of One’s Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World* (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Melanie E. Brewster, ed., *Atheists in America* (2014); Melanie E. Brewster & J. Sawyer, “Atheism and the American family,” in L. Ganong, M. Coleman, & G.J. Geoffrey (eds.), *The Social History of the American Family* (forthcoming); Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (2013); Philip Kitcher, *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (forthcoming); Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (2004); Michael Ruse, *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (forthcoming); Nick Spencer, *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* (2014).

where Christianity has shaped the terms of the debate. What follows is my impression, based on my experience. I welcome your additions and corrections.

(1) Atheists rely on reason, science, empirical research. They take, for example, a skeptical view of miracles, miracles viewed as interventions, presumably divine interventions, in the normal operation of the world, such as walking on water – liquid water, not ice – or converting water into wine, with no intermediate step involving grapes, or converting bread into meat, again directly, instantaneously.

For an atheist, the idea that the world was created six thousand years ago is not a scientific hypothesis, it's just silly. Likewise, there's no basis for rejecting the reality, the threat of global warming, or for denying that human activity has contributed to it.

An atheist sees no reason to have an open mind with respect to things that appear to be not only contrary to experience but also inherently implausible – life is too short for that. Likewise, accepting something on faith in such a situation strikes an atheist as intellectually dishonest, or incredibly naive. We may not be able to prove that Jesus will not come again, the atheist would say, but there's not a shred of evidence that would lead us to conclude that he will.

(2) When you die, you're dead. No heaven, certainly no hell. No resurrection at some time in the future. No reincarnation, whatever you imagine that reincarnation might consist of. Sure, we live on in the memories of those left behind; we live on in our influence; we live on as the components of our body find new homes. But that's fluff, it's not science.

(3) What about prayer? It may affect the person praying; it may affect those who hear the prayer, or hear about it, but does it lead to some divine intervention in the world? No, thank God! Think of how crazy, how unreliable our world would be if individual prayer could change things. Or imagine the burden that this would place on God. I pray for the Phillies to win, my son-in-law prays for the Brewers to win. How is God to decide? I foolishly pray for a day without rain when we're in the midst of a drought. Let's hope that God has the discretion to deny my petition. I could imagine God saying to himself, after a few millennia of this, "I've had enough of this. Humanity has to take care of itself. I'm out of here." Or, you might ask, why can't an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God just do the right thing, without our suggestions?

(4) Where does morality come from? Who sets the rules? Some would say God, just read your Bible. On the contrary, if you do read the Bible, if you study it conscientiously, I think you're bound to conclude that moral authority must have a better foundation than that.

(5) Finally, we have the various so-called proofs of God's existence. The cleverest is the ontological proof. God, by definition, is the most perfect being possible. But a being that exists is more perfect than one that doesn't exist – compare an elephant to a picture of an elephant – therefore God must exist.

A compelling argument, pre-Darwin, was the argument from design. Consider, for example, the human eye, how complicated, how intricate, it is – how perfectly suited to its task. If you were to find a watch on the beach, you would assume that it was made by a watch maker, not, for example, just by the random motion of the waves. The human eye is ever more complicated than a watch – it, too, must have had a creator.

And then there's the first cause argument, still popular today. Why is there something rather than nothing? Science can't tell us – it must be God. But then the atheist – and not just the atheist – would ask, “and where did God come from?”

The first affirmation of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto was “Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.” *Self-existing* – I have no idea what that means.

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The word *atheism*, or *atheist*, quite simply, has two parts. First is that little letter *a* at the front. That *a*, Kerry tells me, is the alpha privative. It is a deceptively brief prefix that deprives what follows; it negates what comes after it. It's like a minus sign. And what comes after the *a* here is *theism* or *theist*, from the Greek *theos*, or *God*.

Thus a theist believes in God, an a-theist denies the existence of God.

What it comes down to, then, really, is how you define God. If someone were to ask me, “do you believe in God?” or if they were to ask, “are you an atheist?” My response to them would be the same: “you'll have to describe God for me, tell me about God – about your God.” Likewise, if they were to ask, more generally, do Unitarian Universalists believe in God, I would ask for a definition, or I would say something wishy-washy, like “some do, some don't, and it depends on what you mean by *God*.”

For those who call themselves atheists, who identify themselves religiously as atheists, my question is, do you really want to define yourself by a negative, by what you don't believe rather than by what you do, by what you reject rather than by what you accept?

And some of you probably call yourselves agnostics. An agnostic is someone who says they don't know. It comes from *gnosis*, which is Greek for knowledge, and that little prefix *a* that we discussed before, which denies what it's attached to. Agnostics, therefore, deny that they have knowledge, in particular, knowledge about the existence of God. To agnostics I would say, keep working on your theology. What is it, specifically, that you claim you don't have knowledge about? That is, you need a definition of God. And, as I suggested to the atheists, how would it feel to define yourself theologically in a positive rather than a negative way?

Many Unitarian Universalists, while they can no longer accept a traditional Christian Trinitarian concept of God, don't feel a need to remove “God” from their vocabulary altogether.

You may be wondering, why, on a morning when you're doing a sermon on atheism, do you do a story about God and have us sing about God.

The story, "God in Hiding",<sup>4</sup> is, of course, a story. It's not meant to be taken literally. Children hear lots of stories that they understand, sooner or later, are not meant to be taken as factual. The point here is to get away from traditional ideas about God, and to consider the metaphor about God having a place in everyone's heart – God in here rather than God out there. You could think of it as a metaphor for humans being created in the image of God, or you could think of it as God as love, and love residing in our hearts.

"Allelu, Allelu,"<sup>5</sup> which we sang earlier, was meant to be ironical. *Alleluia*, literally, means "praise God." What better way, I thought to myself, to begin a sermon on the denial of God than by singing praise to God. Or you could interpret the hymn as giving us permission, encouraging us, to "sing and rejoice" with or without God.

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Which brings me to this morning's question: why would an atheist, a person who pretty much shares the world view I described earlier, why would they come to church on Sunday morning, and why, in particular, would they choose a Unitarian Universalist church?

I can dispose of the second part of that question – why a UU church? – quite quickly. Atheists can feel at home among us; they can belong. Indeed, some would argue that it is theists, not atheists, who might reasonably ask whether they belong in a UU congregation. Don't worry: there's room for both.

Clearly, atheists don't go to church to sing glory to God or to gain favor from God to assure the salvation of their immortal souls. And let's skip reasons for church going like to make my mother happy, for the sake of the children, to have a defense when the Mormons come knocking on my door, to line up prospective clients for my used car business, because that's where the women are, or to have religious cover for a political campaign – and focus on five reasons:

(1) We need to be part of a community. Even introverts feel the need for community, at least some of the time, and a religious community provides a ready-made community, with structure, with easy entry, with defined roles, a reliable community, which will be there for us in bad times as well as good, a community that will recognize our inherent worth and dignity, a community in which we can share our time, our talent, and our treasure, a community where you

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Silf, "God in Hiding," from *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World* (2003), #12 (adapted, DHH, 11/1/09, 7/20/14).

<sup>5</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition* #367.

can share your sorrows as well as your joys, where someone is likely to bring you a casserole or give you a ride to the doctor if that's what you need (and you don't keep your need a secret), where someone will hold your hand.

(2) We need not only to be part of a reliable community, we need to be part of a community that celebrates the transitions of life – for example, the entry into life and the exit from life, the life commitment to another person and the commitment to a congregation.

(3) We need not only to be part of a reliable community, a community that celebrates the transitions of life, but we also need to be part of a community whose mission includes working to bless the world, to bring about the kingdom of God on earth – though the atheist wouldn't use that terminology – working to create the realm of peace, justice, and sustainability. We can do this in a number of ways: we can support the individual efforts of members, either through their jobs or through their volunteer activity (or both, of course); we can support the activities of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the UU Service Committee, or the UU Pennsylvania Legislative Action Network; we can join with others in supporting organizations like the Interfaith Center for Peace and Justice; we can take action as a congregation on particular causes.

(4) We need not only to be part of a reliable community, a community that celebrates the transitions of life, a community that is trying to bless the world, but we need as well to be part of a community where we can go deeper, and wider – where we will find intellectual stimulation, where we will examine our moral values, where our prejudices are challenged, where we'll be comfortable but not all the time, where the music is beautiful, where we're reminded that someday we will die – and what are we going to do about that? – where we will realize that maybe our lives have meaning after all.

(5) We need not only to be part of a reliable community, a community that celebrates the transitions of life, a community blessing the world and in which we can go deeper and wider, but we need also to be part of a community in which we can say *thank you* – where we can say “thank you” that we are alive, that we are alive now, “thank you” that, eventually, life will continue on without us, that we are not indispensable, “thank you” that our world exists, that there is something rather than nothing, that we can say “thank you” without knowing who or what we're thanking, indeed, saying “thank you” without requiring that there be an object for our thanks.

We didn't create all this. We didn't bring about our own lives. It is given to us; we can't claim to deserve it. It's grace; it's a gift. In response, we have an urge to express our gratitude; we want to say "thank you." And we can say "thank you." There doesn't have to be Someone Out There whom we're thanking. There doesn't have to have been purposeful action creating the miracles that surround us. We can still say "thank you."

Let's let the Rev. Brad Greeley – who married Kerry and me 33 years ago – have the last word:

One does not have to believe in a Supreme Being to find comfort, support, courage and insight in a worship service. One does not have to affirm a belief in a deity to feel awe, inspiration or mystery in life. One does not have to maintain obeisance to Almighty God in order to be humble and believe in the existence of things unseen and higher than oneself. One does not have to worship God to be able to lead a life motivated by the good, the true, and the beautiful.<sup>6</sup>

To that I can only say “Amen.”

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. W. Bradford Greeley, “The Faith of a Religious Atheist” (UUA pamphlet, n.d.)