

Theists and Atheists: Can We All Just Get Along?

Intro

Years ago Jay Marx, who is a friend to many in this congregation, gave a sermon about his personal atheism.

You can't really be an atheist, said Jay, unless you actively believe there is no god. And that act -- of believing something you cannot ever prove -- is itself an act of faith.

Which is why Jay calls himself a faith based atheist.

After all, from a scientific standpoint, it makes the most sense to be an agnostic. As Carl Sagan used to say, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Some of us never outgrow the faith of our family of origin. And my family's faith (or at least my father's faith) was atheism.

My dad's antipathy to religion was rooted in religious abuse in his childhood in the faith healing community of Zion, Illinois, where his parents worked in church owned factories for substandard wages and were still expected to tithe, and where my dad was taught that the earth was flat in the church-controlled public school of the 1930s.

My mom had been raised Episcopalian, and did not find it easy to talk about religion with my vehemently atheistic dad.

In the 1960s, when I was a teen, Unitarian Universalism took in our theologically divided family. Our denomination was a radical faith in the sixties. There were cross cringers galore, and the "G word" (god) was seldom mentioned. We UUs were also proud of living pretty exclusively in our heads. We came by honestly the (not entirely affectionate) nickname for Unitarians, "God's Frozen People."

1. Atheism in our Denomination and in Human Society

Our denomination has mellowed over the decades. We have opened our hearts and become more tolerant of a wide range of beliefs. That tolerance is something rare in our society, and in human history. Often it is atheism not theism that is stigmatized, however atheism is defined. For example, the ancient Romans considered Christians to be atheists, because they did not believe in the divinity of dead emperors.

In May I had the opportunity to attend a workshop on atheism at Pacific Central District Assembly. Reverend Chris Schreiner, who led the session, told us about a survey of Americans who were asked whom they would least like their daughter to marry. The list of options included a host of traditionally oppressed groups based on ethnicity and sexual orientation, and it included atheists. Guess who lost? The plurality of those surveyed would rather their daughters married anybody but an atheist.

In the discussion portion of that atheist workshop, a young man from UC Davis shared an experience he had while hosting an information table for the Davis atheists group. A woman walked up to him and asked, if he were an atheist, why he didn't kill babies. As if belief in a deity were the only source of a moral compass. The reality is that prison and non-prison populations have similar percentages of atheists and theists. If anything, there is a slightly higher percentage of atheists outside prison walls.

But intolerant theists are not the Christians and other theists in our midst. So the first lesson I can learn from our theological diversity is tolerance. If the theists can put up with me, I can put up with them. And it's more than that, of course, it is a matter of mutual respect. We can start from a position where you share what works for you theologically and I share what works for me, and we appreciate each other's personal journeys. .

2. The Language We Use Can Help or Hinder Our Ability to Communicate about God

So our denomination has mellowed, leading to more frequent use of the word, “God.” And that begs the question: What do we UUs mean when we talk about God?

In one of my favorite books, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Valentine Michael Smith, a young man raised by Martians, realizes after coming to Earth that long English words have well defined meanings. It’s the little words like God and Love that trip everybody up.

How right he was. As Chris Schreiner said in the atheist workshop, the question is not so much are you a theist or an atheist, as do you like God language or don’t you?

God can mean anything from a personal deity who intervenes directly in the lives of individual humans, through a prime mover who began the universe and allows it to unfold as it will, all the way to a name for existence itself, or even a metaphor for how we feel about being alive. Those are a lot of different things to believe in, or not.

So we come out very different places depending on how we define God. A pantheist who believes the entire universe is god and an atheist who does not believe in god may actually be in agreement about a lot of things. When the pantheist says “I believe in god,” she may be saying almost the same thing as when the atheist says, “I believe in existence but not in god.” Our differences can be purely semantic.

Also, the question whether God interacts with me as a person may be a more important distinction than whether God exists. A high percentage of people who consider themselves theists do not believe in a personal God.

When we think about it, the question of theist vs. atheist comes down to a continuum of beliefs, not just a binary yes or no. And where we are on the continuum shifts for each of us over time. Here is a chart Chris Schreiner shared with us. I think of it as the God Elevator – don't blame Chris for that name.

GOD ELEVATOR – WHAT FLOOR, PLEASE?

7. God is a person who looks like us
 6. God is a person who doesn't have a body
 5. God is a way of talking about things we don't understand
 4. The Ground of Being is transpersonal, but we can metaphorically think of it as a Thou.
 3. The universe is entirely physical but has personal qualities
 2. The universe doesn't have personal qualities, but we can speak poetically as if it did
 1. The universe, and whatever gave birth to it, should never be thought of as personal
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Notice how the word "God" disappears about halfway down the elevator.

And think about what floor you are on right now.

Do you tend to hang out on the same couple of floors?

I'm usually at 2, but sometimes during a really good church service, I go all the way up to 5.

And notice, too, that there are lots of places you could assign the word "atheist." You could say only the people on the very first floor, or you could say everybody up to the sixth floor is an atheist. Again, semantics is key to this discussion.

5. To Be an Atheist Means to Have a Particular Relationship with Time

So what do I get out of my particular belief system? To me, being an atheist means having the strongest possible connection with this moment, this instant we are living in right now. Just as the sky comes all the way down to the ground, eternity comes all the way down to this moment. To be an atheist means that now is irreplaceable. We will not be back this way. Whatever we share in this instant rings with the clarity of eternity, an eternity composed of an infinite number of elegant nows. I find a fierce joy in that belief, an intensity that makes up for the forever I don't believe in. And finally a special gratitude for what is.

To be an atheist in a theologically diverse religious movement challenges me to work on my tolerance. I admit to a tendency toward atheistic snobbery – to the idea that my friends who believe in God will someday get over it, like growing out of the Easter Bunny. And if I were not a UU, I could sit in a corner and congratulate myself on my spiritual acuity all day. To be an unchurched atheist would simply be too easy.

To be a UU atheist shifts me into a point of view oriented more toward mystery, toward the ineffable. I'm just not sure I'm right. Which is a friendlier and more interesting place to be. Because life is a puzzle, and we each carry only a few pieces. And that is how our differences can unite us.

6. As We Reach Out to New People, We Owe it To Ourselves and to them to be Transparent about God Beliefs and God Language in Unitarian Universalism

For people in religions with a creed, there is a built in limit on how far the discussion about the nature of God can go.

Not so for us. The many meanings of God are complicated enough for those of us who have been UU for decades and who have had many chances to talk it through. But what about people who are new to the denomination? How can we help new people be comfortable, and at the same time be true to our (various) ideals?

This subject is especially relevant now because our denomination is trying to attract people from other denominations. Bill Schultz, a former UUA president, spoke at the recent Pacific Central District conference. Bill said that although there are many unchurched nonbelievers in the United States, they are not likely to become Unitarians because by and large they don't see any need for organized religion. In fact, many of them don't especially like organized religion.

I happen to agree, which is why I don't belong to an organized religion and am instead a Unitarian. And by the way, wouldn't that make a great marketing campaign? Sort of like the old slogan, "Pork, the other white meat:"

Only ours would be: "Unitarian Universalism, the disorganized organized religion."

Anyway, Bill went on to say that bringing in people who believe in god is the way for our denomination to grow, because it is people who believe in god who go to church. And of course, if we are going to bring in people who believe in god, it would make sense to move even farther away from that radical UUism of the 1960s by using even more god language.

My concern about this strategy for growth is to make sure we are clear about our terms. If some of us say god and mean metaphor, and people are walking in the door who say god and mean a divine power that intervenes in their lives, we need to be sure we don't accidentally mislead our newcomers or ourselves. I suggest full transparency: plastering ten definitions of God on our Orders of Service, followed by a couple of blanks to fill in one's own.

Being open minded does not mean abandoning your point of view. It means sharing our puzzle pieces and figuring out the big picture together.

7. Our Strength and Our Natural Growth as a Denomination is Among People who are at Home with the Unknowable

So that is why I believe our natural path for growth is among people who are at home with ambiguity. We Unitarian Universalists are people who welcome a free exchange of religious ideas, and who believe that we need not think alike to love alike. People who understand the attraction of the simplest explanation, and the equal and opposite attraction of the ineffable.

And I suggest those are the people to whom we reach out, regardless of whether they identify as theists or atheists. In my view, our outreach should be aimed at intellectual and theological risk takers -- people who want to skate on the thin ice of spirit.

I want to make church with people who are comfortable with the idea that we might all be wrong. Every one of us, theists and atheists alike. We all know that the universe is much bigger and more complicated than we can grasp. So every explanation any human has considered for how and why we got here and what happens next could be just so much hooie.

When all is said and done, I want to be part of a religion that celebrates the unknowable.

Amen, and Blessed Be.

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