

TOWARD A KINDER, GENTLER ATHEISM

A Sermon Delivered by the Reverend Dennis McCarty,
Minister Emeritus, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbus, Indiana

READING: from “About Gentle Atheism”

(“Thoughts from a Gentle Atheist” website: revdennismccarty.com)

The gentle atheist does not equate “religion” with “superstition.” The gentle atheist finds religious belief or non-belief to be irrelevant to a religious life. To be religious is to aspire to a life of significance and meaning in the face of an immense and mysterious cosmos in which we have more questions than answers.

The gentle atheist [seeks] a life of curiosity, appreciation, and commitment. . . . The immensity of time and space [provide] greatness and subtlety. . . beyond human imagination. There is no need for superstition, dogmas, or idolatries. In. . . expanding the boundaries of human insight and knowledge, lie wonder and mystery enough.

At the same time, the gentle atheist acknowledges that belief and disbelief alike can be. . . unhealthy: on the one hand, as ploys to evade the realities of life and death; but also, on the other, to evade the need for human commonality and compassion.

The gentle atheist holds that. . . morality must derive not from any supernatural source of power or authority, but from mutual commitment to optimal human flourishing. Because human beings flourish best as a respectful part of the natural world rather than in attempted mastery over it, the gentle atheist aspires to a life of sustainable relationship rather than short-term exploitation.

From this comes the gentle atheist’s commitment to a life of principle, engagement, and challenge. Religious meaning is attained through a life lived well, courageously, with generosity of spirit.

The gentle atheist acknowledges the demonstrated scientific reality of group dynamics. . . , [which] can lead to self-justification, self-serving delusion, and. . . emotional or even physical violence. In discipline and humility, the gentle atheist resolves to. . . refrain from group assumptions. “Our” goodness is not enhanced through comfortable condemnation of “their” badness.

The gentle atheist aspires to transcend. . . simplistic “us” versus “them” thinking. As part of this, the gentle atheist does not fear the language of religious tradition but, rather, takes an analytical attitude toward both its possibilities and its liabilities.

As creative minds find value in the arts: in poetry and in metaphor; there can also be [creative language] around religion, aspiration, and conscience. The gentle atheist is inclined toward patience and compassion on such issues, [while still resisting] religious language as a mere abstraction of power or a way to evade life’s more difficult realities.

In all this, the gentle atheist strives for meaning in the face of death; aspiration in the face of the world's harshness; and personal and societal evolution in the face of tragedy, imperfection, and entropy.

SERMON: "Toward a Kinder, Gentler Atheism"

In my years of active ministry, I would sometimes quip that I was a Buddhist on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, an atheist on Tuesday and Thursday, a Christian on Saturday, and just, plain confused on Sunday. All of which was true as far as it went. If we talked longer, though, I would add, "But if you really hold my feet to the fire and make me choose, I have to come down as an atheist."

In other words, yes, I am an atheist. But my atheism is informed by my Buddhism--and by my Christian upbringing--and by my appreciation of literature and the arts—and also by what the sciences tell us of the broad cosmos and the journey by which we got here and where we might be going. Human experience is rich and complex. I think it's a mistake to separate out one segment and say *that* is or is not religion.

Romance and imagery aside, I am personally skeptical that there might be any cosmic personality or force that guides or propels the universe. The laws of physics and the mystery of all we do not yet know, are enough for me. But I still believe in romance and imagery. I believe in poetry. I believe in song. I believe in falling in love with wonder. I have read scientists who are similarly romantically inclined.

Life is complex. To me, to be religious is simply to be earnestly engaged with that complexity. To me, liberal religion is the dance with life and love and complexity and creativity and death. We sing to these things in our hearts--and listen for the song to be reflected back to us.

Of course as a Unitarian Universalist, even that much "religious" speech risks controversy. There is tension in Unitarian Universalist circles--between those we call "humanists" on the one hand and those we call "spiritualists" on the other. Whether we call it the "humanist/spiritualist divide" or something else--I've been Unitarian Universalist long enough to experience it as a real and genuine tension in many churches.

As a minister I danced with it in my own Congregation. It was challenging sometimes to try to engage and appreciate all sincere beliefs--and non-beliefs—among the people of my Congregation, while still remaining true to the sentiments in my own heart. At the same time, that dance also brought greater depth and understanding to my own religious outlook. Diversity of belief is a challenge, but it can have its rewards. As my Spanish teacher used to tell us in high school—a person who does not understand a foreign language, does not really understand their own. That goes for religion, as well.

There is such richness, insight, learning, and love in our religious diversity. We have such possibilities. It is hard work to find ways to even talk to one another about our beliefs and non-beliefs. But that discussion is still better than slipping into separate silence or a religion that consists of nothing more than what we *don't* believe.

As I mentioned, I started out Christian. It was a long journey from there to my outlook today. It was only when I retired that I really "came out" as an atheist. After all, our church is not

about what the Minister believes. It's about the hopes and dreams of the whole membership and their beliefs and non-belief. Even now, atheism does not mean I lack a personal sense of wonder and poetry--or lack appreciation for all the diverse religious journeys we celebrate in this rich and varied tradition of ours.

On the one hand, I do sympathize with "humanists" who get tired of hearing traditional religious language. On the other, I also sympathize when someone tells me they want to feel as though they're in a church service, not just a club or symposium.

I even have my own personal gripe over religious language: when I hear one of my colleagues direct a petitionary prayer to "Spirit of Life." I mean, as far as I'm concerned, if you want to pray to God, then pray to God, use the word, I can take it.

But I only bring that up because I realize the solution that would make me comfortable--would also make some other people uncomfortable. That's the way it is with us. We have a thousand different takes on what language works for us and what doesn't. This is an easy faith when it comes to rules. It's not easy when it comes to mixing and matching our different beliefs and non-beliefs and sensitivities. We can only stay in discussion with one another and love and respect one another. The challenge of liberal religion is to keep talking and listening and loving one another in the midst of all our different outlooks and languages. I do also invite as much compassion and tolerance as possible for the poor minister who has to satisfy all those different opinions.

I became Unitarian Universalist and I remain Unitarian Universalist--because to me, we have the most interesting people and the best opportunities for a good discussion. But discussion is best when there's curiosity as well as opinion--and everyone listens as well as talks.

There is a strain of atheism: I've heard it called "new atheism;" that really is, in my opinion, divisive. To such "new atheists" as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, brilliant though they may be in other ways, any kind of "religious" thought is a mental illness. It's not just them. I regularly hear comments from snarky atheists in other venues and in our own Congregations, that "religion" is absurd; that "religious people" are basically dumb, that "religious thinking" is the source of all the world's woes.

I suspect popular culture itself lends energy to that kind of snarkiness. I don't see popular culture leading to thoughtful discussion of anything. I swear to God--or whomever--if an alien landed on earth and listened to talk radio or cable news, they would leave thinking that all Christians hate all gay folks and love any war; that all Muslims behead people; and that all atheists think all religious people are stupid. I'm an atheist. I consider myself a religious person. And I don't think I'm stupid.

My observation is, popular culture has no use for common ground or thoughtful discussion. Because, quite simply, common ground and thoughtfulness do not create cash flow. There's more money to be made out of people yelling at one another. Well, now. Look at the government today, and see where that's gotten us.

People who take time to love and learn from one another are not profitable--so you won't find them in popular culture. You have to come to a place like this. Even here, you have to work at it to nurture thoughtful discussion and thoughtful religion.

As an atheist looking for common ground between what I'm calling "humanism" and what I'm calling "spiritulism," I find myself right back with--the sciences. Atheists though they were, the late Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould--wondrous voices for reason--also wrestled thoughtfully and beautifully with ultimate meaning and the relationship between science and religion. Neil DeGrasse Tyson has some beautiful things to say. Science is very much about

engaging our sense of wonder, as is liberal religion. To me, science and religion are not in conflict or at least they shouldn't be. They should be in partnership.

Last year I ran across a fascinating article in *Science Magazine*, the peer reviewed journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The cover blurb on this article says it all: "Why It Pays To Believe in a Punitive God."

In the article, after years of comprehensive research, a cross-disciplinary team of scientists have developed a theory why so many varied cultures over such a broad span of time--all came to worship what the article calls, "moralizing gods." This moralizing god-concept might be theistic, as in Islam, Judaism, or Christianity. It might be polytheistic, as in any number of ancient civilizations. Or it might even be a kind of disembodied theism, as in the Buddhist moralizing principle of Karma. It ranges from the gods of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome to the Lord God of Israel.

To these scientists, historical belief in "moralizing gods" was essential to building the very foundations of modern, complex society. "By combining laboratory experiments, cross-cultural fieldwork, and analysis of the historical record, [the so-called "big gods" team hypothesizes that] belief in those judgmental deities, or 'big gods,' was key to the cooperation needed to build and sustain. . . large complex society."

That does not mean we all still need to believe in theistic or polytheistic gods. But according to *Science* magazine, they may have played an important role in getting us where we are today.

The [so-called] big gods team does acknowledge that much more research needs to be done. I myself have one serious caveat with their theory. I notice that the [*Science* magazine] article says nothing about the role of sociological group dynamics in all religion: ancient, modern, right up to present-day atheism. We all have to beware of group dynamics.

I absolutely assert--you cannot fully understand religion, particularly as practiced in the West, without a basic understanding of group dynamics. I'm particularly talking about what sociologists call the "ingroup" and the "outgroup."

Very basically, group cohesion was essential to the survival of ancient *homo sapiens*. We evolved to instinctively divide ourselves into "us:" the ingroup; and everyone else: "them," the outgroup. In forming "our" group as separate from "their" groups--again, spontaneously and instinctively—we rather randomly assign positive qualities to our ingroup and negative qualities to the competing outgroups. This is very basic stuff, it's been demonstrated in any number of studies. We see it all the time, from Facebook, to politics, to people rooting for sports teams.

It's all about cohesion within our group in competition with other groups. As one example, the whole body of Hebrew Law in the Torah largely comes down to the means by which the Hebrew ingroup separated itself from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. In fact, the very Hebrew word for "holy," basically translates as "separate."

As just one example, the "cultured despisers of religion" like to point out the ludicrousness of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." After all, much of the Torah is a compendium of mass murder and genocide. But it makes perfect sense in the context of group dynamics. The commandment not to kill applies within the ingroup but not with the outgroup. We don't kill each other or the stranger who comes respectfully into our midst--but that does not cover our actions toward the outgroup: how we treat "them."

Even within the ingroup, killing is acceptable if someone fails to abide by the ingroup's various taboos: that is, the authority of the "moralizing god." "Thus sayeth the Lord," he who wears clothing made of two different fabrics or plants the same field with two different crops is

subject to severe penalty, including death by stoning. That's what it says in Leviticus.

I suggest that traditional religion is much about "our" group in competition with "their" groups--and the *authority* by which we maintain standards, practices, and membership in "our" group--all projected onto "our" moralizing God. I suggest that sin itself, in the traditionally religious sense, is nothing more than a violation of authority--of the ingroup and the ingroup's religious rules as given by the ingroup's "moralizing God."

Fast forward 2,500 years to an article I found on *Scientific American* magazine's website by psychologists Sarah Estes and Jesse Graham. They describe progress toward what they call religious "universalism." They're not talking about us--Unitarian Universalists. They're using "universalism" as a sociological term for a religious outlook which, as they put it, reduces "authoritarianism, dominance, and ethnocentrism," and even more, turns "all of humanity" into our ingroup.

It's an amazing little article which captures, to me, the whole struggle of liberal religion over the past five hundred years: to abandon the group dynamics and authoritarianism of traditional religion and develop a faith of compassion and relationship which sees all of humanity as our ingroup. I think that's a kind of Universalism to which anyone can aspire with honor, even the most skeptical atheist.

But make no mistake, the most skeptical atheist is still just as human as the most fervent, fundamentalist theist. We all have human instincts, including group dynamics. So I have to say--knowing that it's likely to be controversial--that I find the so-called "new atheism's" disdain for "religion" and "religious language" has little to do with reason or logic and everything to do with emotion--group dynamics. Just the same as fundamentalist theism.

Or to put it a different way, group dynamics and group assumptions can take anyone down an irrational road so fast we don't even know it's happening, unless we resist them with a healthy dose of compassion and humility. Because once we let group dynamics take over, the only thing that separates us from ISIS or the kind of person who bombs abortion clinics--is how far we're willing to go down that road.

That doesn't mean that I find all beliefs--or non-beliefs--equally acceptable. But it does mean a willingness to talk--and listen--to one another. So when I think of myself as a gentle atheist or recommend what I'm calling gentle atheism, I'm really talking about the willingness to listen. The compassionate willingness to tolerate, even appreciate religious belief and the poetry of religious language, even when they don't jibe with my personal opinion.

That's not without its challenges. But what I'm calling, "gentle atheism," is not nearly as much about the "atheism"--as it is about "gentle." Belief or non-belief, either one, is easy. Gentleness in religion is hard. But religion shouldn't be about who we can control or who we can out-compete. It should be about the wonder and mystery which are equally accessible--if not quite identical--to the scientist or the theist, to the Buddhist or the Humanist. It should be about relationship and aspiration and justice and fierce commitment to making all these things the very best and most equitable we can. Human relations should be gentle without being obedient. Courageous without being destructive. It's about humility and compassion and listening to one another even in the firmness of our own conviction.

Because make no mistake: I don't think you can even be religious, all by yourself, any more than you can be loving all by yourself.

Frankly there's nothing unique in Unitarian Universalist circles, about my take on atheism. I suspect a lot of UU atheists feel similarly. This isn't the kind of religion that makes many headlines. It is, however, the kind of religion that can help us work together to create a healthier,

more just world. Amen. May it be so.