

Atheists Do TOO Have Songs

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. Christine Robinson on September 3, 2023

At the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico

Intro to the Message

Angela is on vacation this weekend....and a well-deserved one it is! Not only has she been solo-ministering while Bob is on sabbatical, but she's had some guest preachers back out suddenly, which, believe me, is a lot of stress! I subbed for one of those, back in July, and it was so good to be back in this pulpit...see all your faces, new and old, and feel your good will!

This is the last in the summer series of sermons on different faith traditions, which Angela asked me to take on late last Spring, and I've been thinking about it as I listened to sermons all Summer. This message will be focused on atheism, along with other theologies which de-center, doubt, or reject the presence of divinity in our lives. Our little puppet, Carl Coyote, told his story of becoming an Atheist this morning, and this slice of the theological pie, though relatively uncommon in the general population, is held by between 1/3 and 1/2 of UUs. Another third of UU's believe, like Olivia Owl, in a large and impersonal sort of higher power, or purpose, or spirit. Sometimes they call themselves pantheists, which means God is Everything, and a subtle variation of that is panentheists, which means that God is both everywhere in our universe AND has Being outside of it. The remainder hold, with Rebecca Rabbit, some variety of belief in a personal god or goddess or divinities... who might respond to prayer, to offer love and comfort...steer things towards good...that sort of thing. Rebecca, an eternal 6-year-old, articulated a pretty simple belief in a loving God...most adult UU's who believe in a loving god are, well...more adult-like! A small percentage of those traditional believers think of themselves as liberal Christians, believing in a loving God especially known in the teachings of Jesus. A few UU churches, all in New England, are focused on serving Christian UU's, the majority of our congregation nationwide, are focused on serving the atheist-Humanist segment of our population, this congregation, like most of the larger UU congregations strives to serve all three theological groups, both by careful balancing of worship topics and liturgies, and by sponsoring many different discussion, spiritual practice, and religious development options.

So...Atheism and other faith schemes which do without God are a pretty big deal around here and of course had to be included in our Summer survey of religious and theologies. It got its start way last May, when the question of the morning was "what is Religion." That service included a song which I....I might have been alone in this....had never heard before, a 2010 hit by Steve Martin called "Atheists Don't have no songs." It was very funny, in context, but I found a frown on my face and the desire to yell out, "They do too!". However, yelling out is something that ministers emeriti NEVER do, so I saved that thought for a revenge match on the last week of this series. It is a great blessing to work with Susan and our musicians on this project because hey, atheists and friends have A LOT of REALLY GOOD songs, and...this may surprise you, many are songs of faith...just not faith in God. Anyway, here is a taste of that song to jog your memory...

Atheists Don't Have No Songs

Words & Music: **Steve Martin**

(The Band) : Atheists Don't Have No Songs (AKA The Atheist Hymnal)
Christians have their hymns and pages,
Hava Nagila's for the Jews,
Baptists have the rock of ages,
Atheists just sing the blues.

Atheism

It goes on like that....

"No one ever wrote a tune, for godless existentialism,"

And gets worse:

Atheist tunes add up to nada, can only sing rock and roll, never sing a song of faith,

And even worse; instead of going to mass,

"Atheists just take a pass, Watch football in their underpants.

Watch football in their underpants." Ouch.

Atheists, as you well know, have good songs, we've heard several good atheist songs already and there are more to come, and even more importantly, atheists live full lives of love and service and meaning.

What atheists don't have much of is respect. The grim, dissipated, rootless existence implied in this song about atheists, not to mention the worse thoughts of immorality and despair that some believers think characterize atheist lives is just....prejudice. We know we're not that way! But some believers really can't imagine how anybody could live a joyful, satisfying, or moral life without believing in God, or face death without knowing that they are going to heaven. It's a sort of ignorance. Probably more often, though, prejudice against atheists is expressed because "atheist" is one of those categories of people who can be picked on and made fun of and felt superior to, because they've been assigned underdog status. This goes back to Antiquity. Socrates was executed in 399 B.C.E. for the crime of Atheism. At least we don't have THAT anymore! But we are still told that being elected the President of the United States would still be pretty much impossible for an out-of-the-closet atheist. With 44% of Americans doubting that it is even POSSIBLE to live a moral life if you don't believe in God, and when, in 2018, poll respondents who were asked to rank faith groups put atheists and Muslims at the bottom of their lists.

The subject of atheism flared at the beginning of the century, fueled by one author who wanted to blame believers in God...particularly "God" in Arabic, which is "Allah," for the world's troubles. That was Christopher Hitchens. He and three others, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and

Richard Dawkins were a cultural moment with their bestselling books and extensive tours. It was an exciting cultural moment, but it faded quickly, as the author's, books, emotional tone and outright prejudice didn't wear too well. Only Dennett is still writing...just last week, there was an review in the New York Times about his newest book, *I've Been Thinking*. The others, I'm sorry to say, descended into anger, intolerance, and in two cases, the alt-right movement. That was very disappointing.

These men all made the point that atheism was increasing in society, and they got that part right. Atheism was increasing as a percentage of population in those days and it has continued to grow, doubling in a 2018 Pew survey to 4%..up from 2% only a decade earlier. This increase is fueled by younger generations, which show big increases, but a larger % of people in EVERY generation tell pollsters that they are atheists than they used to. About 75% of atheists are men, the vast majority are White, college educated, and politically liberal, although this moderates with each younger generation. Interestingly, atheists are also among the most informed of any religious group about religion in general, way out-performing the population on religious topics including specifics of Christian belief, and they were twice as likely as the average American to know that the Constitution says that "no religious test" shall be necessary to hold public office.

...and others who live without God

So, many UU's are atheists, although in this, as in so many other things, we call our atheism by many names. Atheists, who don't believe in God, but also, naturalists, who focus on this world, it's beauty and intricacy, Stoics, who study and try to live a venerable philosophy developed in Greece around 300B.C.E, and Humanists, as well as agnostics who lean against believing in any supernatural reality abound amongst us. The bottom line is that they –we- and others who identify the same way- live without recourse to God or other supernatural entities, focusing instead on love of neighbor, appreciation of this life, and, in the case of Humanists, on the growth and potential of human beings. The generous spirit of Unitarianism, non-doctrinal to its core, expanded to meet the religious needs of those whose world view doesn't include God, more than 100 years ago, and the Universalists, also non-doctrinal to their core, followed in the middle of the last century. This is a religious community which has been enriched beyond measure by the gifts of atheists, naturalists, Stoics and Humanists, who remind us of our obligation, as our Purposes and Principles say, to heed the results of science and warn us against idolatries of mind and spirit.

The Humanists

(Big loud noise from puppet theater, Carl and Olivia are waving furiously.)

Ah.... What's this? (sees puppets) I thought you guys had gone back to Angela's bookcase! (Christine sits down and Carl whispers.) You've been listening to the sermon? Oh..well. I'm flattered! (Rebecca whispers) You didn't understand what I said about Humanism? Oh.

Humm. Well, let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, there was a terrible pandemic, and lots of people in the world got sick and died, and everybody else was very worried because they didn't want to get sick and die, and everybody had to stay home to stay safe. People were lonely and afraid, and their lives were interrupted...they couldn't go to work or school or see their friends. Lots and lots of people lost their jobs. It was really bad. Some people wondered how a powerful and loving god could possibly let such a thing happen. (Carl nods)

As time went on, people got organized. The scientists started working on a vaccine. The medical people experimented with new treatments. Churches like this one started holding their services and other activities and meetings on zoom. The government sent money to everyone, because some many people didn't have jobs, and many of the people who still had jobs found ways to pass that money on to help others. People who could make masks made them out of sewing scraps so we could at least go to the grocery store. You puppets helped, too, remember? You did all kinds of silly things here at church like climb trees and get in the dishwasher and let us take pictures to make people smile. (much nodding and giggling, then Carl whisper) What does this have to do with humanism?

Humanists believe that the best thing we can be sure of in this world is people, who are smart enough and good enough to take care of each other, to make vaccine, and figure out how to solve problems. They think we don't need gods and goddesses and even minor deities. They put their faith in people...in humanity. (Rebecca whispers) Yes, you are right. There are some very bad people. And it's the job of the rest of us to make sure they don't do bad things, and to fix it when they do. It's up to people, here in this life, to make a better world for everybody. Got the picture? Good! Thanks for helping me with this sermon, but I think I'd better go back to the pulpit, now. (Rebecca goes down, Carl stays)

YES, Carl? (he whispers) Is there such a thing as coyoteism? I think you are going to have to invent it, Carl. BYE. (he gives a quick god bow and disappears. Cr returns to pulpit.)

Spiritual Without God

Now...where was I? Ah..

The bottom line for Atheists in all their flavors, is that they have looked at the world as clearly as they can, thought deeply about what they have found here, and have found no support for the God Hypothesis. Although believers in God often think that any open-minded person will discover God in the world, or by logic, the fact is that even the Bible says that "no one has seen God," and acknowledges that if we are to find God, we must do so in a journey of faith. The fact is that some people take the journey of faith and find simply a beautiful, intricate, natural world

full of enough meaning and challenge and a human world filled with enough love and purpose for a rich lifetime and don't get so much as a hint that there is anybody or anything supernatural in our lives. So, they don't ask themselves what God wants. They ask themselves, "is my life better, am I more loving, more able to manage setbacks and grief, more joyful because of what I believe? Is the world a better place? Will I be able to die with grace and a whispered "thanks" when the time comes?"

Those are the questions of every spiritual journey...atheist or theist, Christian or Buddhist or Pagan or any other. It is pondering like this that deepens our lives, whatever we believe, and deepening our lives is spirituality. Spirituality doesn't depend on any kind of deity, it depends on focusing your life on deep things like meaning, acceptance, and peace.

Which is why we, who honor the importance of the individual search for truth and meaning, define spirituality as the depth dimension of life...with Divinity or Without. Our spirituality It is the part of life where meaning comes from, where the "why" questions come from, where Love lives. We look deep for a sense of connections, for compassion, for the strength to live up to our moral values. There's depth of life available for every human being and there are spiritual practices to fit every kind of belief about the meaning of life.

One of the practices of spirituality is honoring Mystery...all the things we don't know, can't see, don't understand. What happens to us after this life? We may have our guesses, but really, nobody knows. How did this amazing universe come to be? Theories abound but at their core is always the mystery. What do I do with my, one, wild and precious life? The best we can within the beauty, the love, the pain, and the evil that is with us, in us, and around us. Some people just have to pick answers and pretend that they are certain. UU's are much more likely to be able to just....let the mystery be.

Band: "Let the Mystery Be Words & Music: Iris DeMent"

Conclusion

We Unitarian Universalists have many theologies and are united in our attempt to keep an open hearted and curious response to others and what they believe, which is how we atheists and theists, liberal Christians and pagans get along together here. Instead of bashing away at those who don't believe as we do, we ask questions, wonder about why they believe as they do, or ignore them. And when we are blasted by those who don't understand us, we show that we're worth our salt by sticking to our own complex vision of reality and not retaliating in kind. That's the richness of Liberal Religion. May it thrive in our world, and may we be ever more effective liverers of its life and tellers of its story.