

Spiritual Atheism

Spring 2017. The winter of that year had been long for recent times, and the spring that followed was even longer. And weaker. It was cold, it was wet, it was dank – all for much longer than it should have been. It felt like summer would never come again. Then one day – and I believe it was already mid-June by this point – I got up and noticed in passing that the weather seemed better than usual. Finally, I thought, a nice summer-ish day. I went about my normal routine and about the middle afternoon, as I always do, I took a break from work to walk the dog. As we walked out into the shadow of my building, I was preoccupied with work as I usually was.

And then I stepped around the corner of the building, from the shade into the sunlight, and I was struck with this feeling. It was the smell of the dry earth on the breeze and the lazy sound of cicadas in the trees. It was the touch of grass under my bare feet when I was a child, and the quality of the light just before the street lights came on. It was the feel of the heat radiating from the pavement and the taste of ice cream and the smell of barbecue. It was the shade underneath trees and the texture of birch bark and pine cones. It was the sparkle of sunlight on the lake at our cottage, the nudging of the waves lapping against the pier on an afternoon in which you have nothing planned. Time and space had disappeared. Summer hadn't just come; it had hit me in the face, and the experience was so great that it stopped me in my tracks. I opened my eyes and realized that I was just standing there, my dog pulling impatiently on the leash, and I was filled with joy.

This was what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called a peak experience, and what is more commonly described as a religious experience. Maslow made it his goal to study these experiences. Before he began investigating them, he thought they were something that only happened to people who were - first of all, Christian - and also, very pious. But when he started collecting information from people, what he found was that peak experiences happen to people of all religions and they are triggered by all kinds of different things. Maslow had studied the writing of saints and other ancient mystics and he was fascinated to find that the people he spoke to described their experiences using the very same words those supposedly holy people had. What greater evidence do we need that we are all spiritual beings?

When you say the words spiritual atheism to people, their immediate reaction is usually that that is a contradiction in terms, that spirituality and atheism are opposing viewpoints. When I first started preparing for this talk, I thought that this was because the word spirituality is very ambiguous – it's a word that can have very different meanings to different people. And if you listen to other people who claim to be both spiritual and atheist, they spend a lot of time nailing down exactly what they mean by the word "spirituality." But the more I thought about this subject and talked to others about it, the more I realized that the problem isn't the definition of the word spirituality – it's the definition of the word atheism.

Now, atheism simply means the belief that there is no God – that seems straightforward, doesn't it? However, there are three other concepts that we in our culture wrap up with the belief in God without realizing it. I will use these to illustrate how atheism and spirituality fit together. The first and perhaps most important of these concepts is the notion that we know who God is and what God wants. The word atheism contains the word theism, but theism by itself doesn't just mean belief that there is a God. It means belief in a specific God – maybe that God is a certain gender, or that God approves of

certain things and disapproves of others. Theism is essentially the belief that you understand who God is. Most religions operate this way, but some atheists make a distinction between pure atheism – the belief that God doesn't exist – and anti-theism, which is somewhat of a new term. Anti-theists believe that the important question is not "does God exist" but rather "if God exists, do we know what God wants from us?" Because if the answer to that question is "no," theistic religion is a mistake either way - whether God exists or not. However, in everyday life, anti-theists – as well as other groups like deists and pantheists – need to live the same way that atheists do. We can't look to religion to guide our lives. I think the distinction between these beliefs – atheism, deism, pantheism and anti-theism – is important intellectually, but the spirituality they inspire all comes out the same in the wash so to speak. The beauty of spirituality without theism is that it avoids dividing people.

Even more importantly, it is also more powerful than theism. We started off the service today listening to the song Hallelujah. Hallelujah is a Christian word and God is mentioned several times in the song. But it's one of the most popular songs in the world, and many people who like it, and even many who have sung it, are not religious. How can that be? If you listen to the lyrics of the song, they mostly talk about other things besides God, particularly music and love. I believe those subjects – among others, of course, - are more powerful than theism. For example, I know someone who doesn't identify as religious or even spiritual at all, yet he plays the organ at a United church because he likes the music. He recently joined the choir there too, and he told me that once that another member of the choir said that they were going to quit. When the choir director asked why, the person said they didn't really believe in the Bible and weren't sure if they belonged there. And the choir director's response was: "oh don't worry about it. We're all just here for the music." As another example, both one of my favorite musicians and one of my favorite authors are Mormon. If I want to be honest with myself, I can't stop liking their work just because I don't agree with their religion. That's because explanations of what your God looks like, who your God is, or even what your God wants are not actually what moves people. Spirituality is what you get when you move beyond those specifics.

The second thing we wrap up with our belief in God is the assumption that God is a creator, that any God that exists must be the creator of the universe. This assumption is ironically the reason why many people are atheist. Because if God created everything, then who created God? Atheists call this the fallacy of passing the buck. Saying that God created the universe doesn't answer the question of how God came to exist. It's circular logic. At some point, there had to have been a being that was created by random chance. Now, one could make the argument that the Big Bang created a superior being who in turn created us, but I've never heard a religious person make that argument, again because in our culture, we assume that any God that exists must be a creator God.

How does this relate to spirituality? If I said to you that I believe humans have souls, you might say, how can you believe in souls, but not believe in God? But just because humans have souls doesn't mean that those souls were created by, or are under the control of, a God. Souls could just be a part of nature that we can't detect yet, just as we couldn't detect radiation until we invented the right instruments for that and discovered it by accident.

Today there are many religious people who have set out to prove that we humans "need God in our lives." I once talked to someone – yes, on the internet - who claimed that he had absolute proof that atheists don't exist and that everyone is innately religious. His proof was that studies have shown that when people believe they are going to die, they pray, even if they were not religious beforehand. The

atheists who read this responded defensively. “Well if I thought I was dying I wouldn’t pray because I know better,” they said. My response to this was – wait a minute, there’s a middle ground here. If studies show that people who are facing death pray, chances are I would do the same. But the difference between me and a religious person is I would realize that praying is an irrational thing to do. And that’s okay, because people do irrational things all the time. That irrationality is, to me, the root of our spirituality.

We are spiritual beings because science can explain things, but that’s all it can do. For example, a few years ago, scientists announced the news that they had discovered the “love” hormone, and it was called oxytocin. In particular, they said that this hormone was responsible for creating the bond between a mother and her newborn child. People were unsettled by this news at first, but of course, understanding the reason behind the formation of the maternal bond didn’t stop it from happening. We would be in big trouble as a species if it had. But think about what that means. It means irrationality will always be part of being human. No matter how much science manages to explain, no matter how artificial the environment we live in becomes, we will always need instincts of some kind to survive in it, and emotions are really just an extension of those instincts.

In fact, there are evolutionary explanations for all of the “spiritual” things I’ve talked about today. I started off talking about summer. From an evolutionary perspective, most people who live in cold climates prefer summer over winter because it’s easier to survive in summer. Similarly, music is just an evolutionary side-effect of language. It’s been shown that people who don’t like music also have a hard time understanding tone, context and even meaning in spoken language. And emotions? Well, emotions are just nature’s way of getting animals to do what they are supposed to do. Social animals survive by co-operating with each other. But if those animals weren’t capable of feeling the emotion of loneliness, they would have no reason to stay together. So now that I’ve explained to you the evolutionary purpose of emotions, does that mean you will be able to ignore any emotions you feel from now on? Of course not. This stuff is more powerful than science. I think a simple definition of spirituality is the attempt to be comfortable with, and to better process, those instincts and emotions that make us irrational – that make us human.

The last thing we wrap up with belief in God is that God needs religion, and that religion has to be about belief. Probably everyone here knows the name of Bill O’Reilly. Several years ago, O’Reilly did an interview with David Silverman in which he famously said: “tides go in, tides go out; you can’t explain that.” Well everyone laughed at this because of course science can explain that; we know that the tides are caused by the pull of the moon’s gravity on the earth. But the focus on that mistake caused people to ignore something else important that happened in the interview. Silverman made the point that there are a lot of atheists who go to church, meaning, of course, the conventional sort of church. O’Reilly scoffed at that and probably many others did too. But what Silverman was trying to get at is that there are other reasons besides belief to be part of a religious organization. There’s community, which is very important to peoples’ psychological well-being, and there’s also the comfort of ritual, of having something familiar and routine in your life. I mentioned before that there are many definitions of the word spirituality, and I think that if community and familiarity are the only things someone gets out of a religion, then that *is* their spirituality.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have our seven principals, but if I had to sum up the reason for our religion in one sentence, I would say that we’re here to make people feel better. To make both

ourselves and each other feel better. That is a goal that anyone can get behind, and I think that once people get over the negative effects of following religions that are theistic and dogmatic, a lot of people who currently dislike religion will realize that it can still be beneficial, just in a different form. And one of those forms is us. There are many people out there think to themselves “well I can’t honestly believe in what my religion teaches to be true, but I still feel like I need something spiritual in my life.” One of my goals in life is to show people that you can have one without the other; that you can have spirituality without theism and dogma.

I read recently about a man in England named Guy Stagg who suffered from depression and, in a last-ditch effort to try and feel better, he decided to walk from London to Jerusalem. He had been raised an atheist and didn’t identify as religious or even spiritual; he had simply noticed that walking made him feel better. He did, however, do his “pilgrimage” in an authentic way; instead of planning ahead for accommodation, he stayed in churches and mosques and depended a lot on charity as he travelled. After his “pilgrimage” was finished, he said that it didn’t change his beliefs about the existence of God, but it did make him realize that “religion is about a lot more than belief: it’s about being in touch with something that’s moving and meaningful, even if it’s only moving and meaningful in a human rather than a supernatural way.”

I’ve now spent a lot of time trying to define spirituality in an intellectual way, so I want to leave you with a story that purposely don’t seek to do that – a story that illustrates at least *my* spirituality all on its own. Believe it or not, it’s also the story of a commercial, and it’s a commercial I’ve only seen online and only a few times. The commercial starts with a little girl running out onto a beautiful back porch and she has with her a little electronic box with a speaker in it. You soon realize that this box is meant to be one of those new computers like Siri or Alexa that answers questions for you. The little girl says to the box “computer, how old is the Earth?” And the box responds “the Earth is 4.5 billion years old.” The commercial goes on to show the little girl running through fields and playing in the woods, and at the end of it she’s lying in a field of grass looking up at the sky. And she says to the box “computer, do you know what it feels like to have the sun on your face?” The computer responds “I do not know.” And the little girl says “I didn’t think so.”

Thank you.

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